The Garden of Words

Makoto Shinkai

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The Garden of Words

Makoto Shinkai

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Copyright

The Garden of Words
Makoto Shinkai
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CHAPTER ONE

Rain, Blisters, the Thunder Whispers.
—Takao Akizuki

I didn't know about these things until I started high school, Takao Akizuki thinks.

Some stranger's umbrella is getting the hem of his blazer wet. He can smell the lingering traces of mothballs locked in the fibers of a suit. His back is too warm where someone is pressed against it. An unpleasant wind from the air conditioner is blowing right in his face.

It's been two months since he started riding the crowded morning train, and the idea that three more years of this purgatory await him is like a hopeless weight on his soul. In an attempt to keep from touching the other riders, he plants his feet and grips the ceiling strap hard enough to make his fingertips go numb.

I don't belong here, he thinks, irritated.

He once read a manga that belonged to his brother about a killer who mowed people down with a machine gun, and right now he envisions himself doing the same. After all, it's just a thought. *If there was a killer, though…* Takao promptly reconsiders. *I'd be one of the victims. Just a fifteen-year-old kid. Nothing special.*

Outside the small train window and partially blocked by sullen, silent heads, the rain-soaked city streams past. The landscape is dulled by thick rain clouds, except for the sharp lights of the condominiums and mixed-use buildings. Thin slices of other people's daily lives flicker past him in an unceasing river—the reflection of a TV information program in a table, a tight skirt moving through a kitchenette, faded posters on walls, an umbrella dashing out of a bicycle parking lot—and the unknown world beyond him is overwhelming. And infuriating.

He's fifteen years old. He knows so little.

Before long, the car leans into a gentle right curve. When he begins to see the ranks of skyscrapers through the gaps between the mixed-use buildings, Takao closes his eyes. He knows what's coming. *One, two, three, four…* When the slow count in his head reaches eight, a low rumble builds to a burst of wind pressure that rocks the whole car. He opens his eyes as the windows of the Chuo Line flash by like a strip of film, just beyond the windows of his own train.

The same time as always.

Two more minutes until I'm out of this hellbox. He can't wait.

"Shinjukuuu, Shinjukuuu."

Takao is ejected onto the platform just as the announcement sounds, and he sucks in short, deep breaths of cold, rainy May air. As the mindless human current washes him toward the stairs, he thinks, *This is it*, and looks up.

Beyond the long, thin ribbon of sky between the platform roofs, the Docomo Yoyogi building looms like an uncharted mountain peak, blurred by the rain.

His steps slow, and a few people bump into his back, including a businessman, who makes his frustration known. But Takao ignores him and spends two more seconds there, drinking in the sight of the rain and the tower.

The falling water carries the scent of the distant, unreachable sky down to him.

This is no day to be riding the lousy subway, he decides, and the frustration inside him begins to unspool and dissolve.

Going down the Sobu Line stairs, he turns his back on the Marunouchi Line transfer gate, walks quickly through the JR Central East ticket gate, and runs up the stairs by the Lumine EST building with newfound cheer. Popping open his clear vinyl umbrella, he steps out into the downpour, and the plastic above his head becomes a surround-sound speaker playing the sound of rain.

Patter patter patter. It's so pleasant as he makes his way through the crowd at the southeast gate. This early in the morning, the Shinjuku commuters are joined by all sorts of other people. Men and women, probably nightclub staff who were drinking up until just a little while ago; a line of about a dozen people waiting for the pachinko parlor to open; a group of similar-looking Asian tourists, perhaps a large family; an odd couple wearing cosplay-style uniforms, whose ages and occupations are impossible to guess.

It's so weird, he thinks. If today had been sunny, I'd be so angry to see them here. I would've wished death on all of them, and yet...

Maybe it's because they all have umbrellas up—because the rain falls on all of them equally. On a rainy day, when he walks along by himself in his high school uniform, he's just another part of the scenery. Somewhere along the way, the curses and hatred he held on the train have dispersed completely.

He crosses the congested Koshu-Kaido Avenue and passes the permanently unfinished construction site for the Loop 5 road, and a dark, dense forest rises before him. The enormous national park straddles the boundary between Shinjuku and Shibuya Wards. On rainy mornings, it's practically deserted, almost as if it's there just for him.

The *clack* of the automatic gate sounds oddly loud in the empty park.

The gate eats his ¥200 park entry ticket. *I really need to get an annual pass next time*, he thinks, and then he steps into the park. He'll need to take an ID photo and pay ¥1,000, but that ¥200 per visit has added up to a ridiculous amount already. He's worried about being questioned about his school uniform during the application process, though, which has given him some pause.

With such thoughts running through his head, he strolls down a path among the Himalayan and Lebanon cedars, and then the air and sounds and scents suddenly change.

The temperature comes down a full degree, the scent of water and new greenery fills the air, and despite the rain, he can hear the contented singing of wild birds.

On the other side of a mixed forest of metasequoias and sawtooth oaks, there's a traditional Japanese garden with a pond. The sound of raindrops and their innumerable ripples whispers hauntingly from its surface.

Seriously, how…

The emotion aching in his chest is one he's felt many times before.

This world is so intricate, he thinks, spellbound. Hundreds of millions of raindrops, trillions of ripples, all intertwined with each other—no matter where or when he looks, the interplay never breaks down. It's perfection. How could someone ever hope to realize perfection like this with skill?

And by comparison…

As he walks over the arched bridge to the far side of the pond, Takao looks down at his feet. The moccasins he's wearing are heavy and waterlogged through the gaps in their stitching, clopping awkwardly with each step.

I'll have to start making new shoes this weekend, he thinks, but it doesn't affect his excitement.

He did a decent bit of waterproofing on these handmade moccasins, but they aren't going to last long in a season as rainy as this one. He'll make the next pair last two months, he decides, and he looks up from the crest of the bridge at the wide expanse of cloudy sky to the west.

The Yoyogi building is visible here, too, and it looks even bigger. It watches him from high above as the tip of the tower gently dissolves into the clouds on the other side of a misty curtain.

That's right. I saw this tower back then, too, from the cold grass at Meiji Shrine.

It's been over two years since then, but all the emotions of that moment rise inside him again—the joy, the pain, the resolve—as if they've thawed out of ice. However, he also notices that the sting has turned into something faintly bittersweet. *I'm still a kid, but at least…*

At least I'm beginning to understand what I like, and where I'm headed, he thinks.

The thunder rumbles faintly in the distance, as if in answer.

* * *

Takao Akizuki had started middle school as Takao Fujisawa.

About three months after his first year of middle school began, his mother came home early one night—an unusual event. The two of them finished dinner, and not long after his mother's evening drink had changed from beer to shochu, she asked him a question.

"Takao, do you have a girlfriend?"

“Huh? No…”

When he looked at his mother’s face, mystified, her eyes were red and bloodshot. *She looks awful when she’s drunk*, he thought, but he held a glass of ice water out to her. She ignored it and instead dumped more shochu and hot water into a ceramic tumbler, stirring them together with a muddler. *…Ugh. She’s planning to drink more.*

“Hey, Mom, should I put out some edamame for you?”

“Don’t bother. Say, you wanna drink a little, too, Takao?”

Who even has parents like this? he thought with disgust. “No.”

“Aw, pull that stick outta your butt. I had my first boyfriend and my first drink in my first year of middle school.”

He’d been wondering what she was going to come up with this time, and apparently it was tales of her checkered love life. Right after starting middle school, she’d dated the baseball club member who had the seat next to hers, but a few months later, a senior member of the soccer club had told her he liked her; she hadn’t been able to decide between them, so she dumped the baseball player. After that, she’d fallen hard for a high schooler she saw on the train on the way to school. She’d worked up the courage to ambush him at the station and give him a love letter, and miraculously, he’d said okay. He’d come over to her house from time to time, and their parents had given the green light, too; she’d gotten her first kiss in her bedroom, and she still remembered the pure happiness of that moment, but then a boy from another school had given her a love letter at the station, and—

“Hang on,” Takao interrupted.

“What?”

“Look, most kids don’t want to hear about their mom’s kisses. When Dad gets home, tell him about it. And you really need to drink some water so you can work tomorrow. You’ve been drinking a little too much today, Mom.”

After his rant, Takao stood from his chair and was preparing to escape to his room when he noticed his mother had fallen silent. Her eyes were red, and the liquor wasn’t why. “I’m sorry,” she murmured, and he noticed that her voice seemed dark and melancholy around the edges. “I was trying to say that in middle school, you’re basically already an adult. You know things can get complicated.”

Takao had a bad feeling about this. His mother was still just a couple of years over forty; her hair softly framed her face with its loose wave. She was wearing a pink sleeveless blouse, and tears were pooling in her large eyes. Even to her son, she looked very young.

“Your dad and I have decided to get a divorce.”

That night, Takao had his first drink.

In the dead of night, he crept into the kitchen alone, lit only by a yellow night-light. He popped open a can of his mother’s beer, complaining to himself the whole time. *Are you kidding me? Gimme a break!* His mother had told him they’d waited for his big brother to find a job and for Takao to start middle school. *“You’re both adults now, so I know you’ll understand.”*

Are you kidding me?

He chugged the beer noisily. *Gluck, gluck, gluck.* The pungent smell of alcohol almost made him spit it out, and his eyes were tearing up, but he forced it all down. *What the hell? This is nasty.* But he put the can to his lips again. *Sure, my brother's an adult.* He was feeling queasy now. *We're eleven years apart. But I'm—just in my first year of middle school. We aren't adults.*

"God, what the hell? Couldn't you wait three more years?"

He didn't have any solid grounds for thinking so, but first-years in high school were probably adults. *Meaning if this had happened three years from now...*, he mused through the dull ache beginning in his head. *But middle schoolers are kids. Everybody knows that.*

He felt like he was going to die, but he still emptied two cans of beer, then cut shochu with cold water and drank that, too. It smelled even worse than the beer. Still, the alcohol put Takao to sleep that night. The next morning, of course, he had a roaring hangover, and he ended up skipping school. Another first.

He felt dirty.

"So, Fujisawa, you're really Akizuki?"

"I guess. My mom's the one who has custody."

It was December of his first year in middle school. Takao had only just managed to grow past five feet, but Miho Kasuga, who was walking beside him, was still half a head shorter. She was conscientiously wearing their school's designated duffle coat, even though it wasn't a school day, and her twin ponytails only deepened her resemblance to an elementary schooler. As for Takao, the navy-blue down jacket he was wearing was a hand-me-down from his brother, but on his feet were a pair of leather sneakers he'd spent forever picking out. They were umber and low cut, and the leather still had an elegant luster to it even though he'd bought them used. Their previous owner must have taken good care of them.

"But you're Fujisawa at school, right?"

"She probably thought that getting my name changed in the middle of my first year would've been too rough on me. They're letting me stay Fujisawa until graduation, even on the register. My mom was so proud of herself when she told me about it."

He bitterly remembered that it was all his mother had actually done.

"What about your brother?"

"He's with us, too. We don't see him much now that he's working, though. He gets home late, and he leaves for work before I get up in the mornings."

He could sense Miho's mood falling, but he pretended not to notice and injected a bit more cheer into his tone.

"Look, that's Meiji Shrine, right? Pretty easy walk from Shinjuku."

Against the buildings lining the four-lane road and the weighty Metropolitan Expressway overpass, the contrast of the forest looked like a bad Photoshop job.

His dates with Miho Kasuga were always walks around parks. Maybe *dates* wasn't the word for them—after all, they weren't even officially a couple—but in any case, they often spent their days off together. When they'd exhausted most of the parks along their train route—Inokashira, Shakujii, Koganei, Musashino, Showa Memorial—Miho had suggested visiting the ones in the city center, too. Takao hadn't been particularly interested in nature when they started, but he couldn't spend money on movie theaters and aquariums and the like every time they went out, and Miho's excitement over the flowers and trees was fun to watch. Thanks to her, he'd learned the names of quite a few birds and plants. Besides, Takao had grown up in the colorless public apartments of Suginami; he wasn't quite over the discovery that there was anywhere this green in metropolitan Tokyo. *"I like these little places, with just trees instead of houses or schools or trees,"* Miho had once told him in a carefree sort of way. Even if he didn't say it, Takao thought she was more of an adult than he was. At least she knew what she liked. He doubted many others at school did. He certainly didn't.

"It's so warm," Miho said, holding a plastic cup in both hands.

They'd wandered all over the vast precincts of Meiji Shrine together, taken a picture standing side by side in front of the big torii gate, read the prayers written on the ranks of votive tablets that hung outside the main hall, and even lined up to visit Kiyomasa's Well. All the activity had left them exhausted, and now they were sitting side by side on the dry grass, drinking coffee with milk that Takao had brought in a thermos. The cold winter air was clear as the sound of a bell, and the sugar in the hot, creamy coffee was pleasant on his tongue.

For the past few months, he had felt like a child lost at the supermarket—anxious and lonely. His only respite from the constant anxiety and loneliness was the time he spent with Miho, when those feelings disappeared like magic. There wasn't a cloud in the sky that December afternoon; the blue, transparent canvas overhead was full of light. Beyond the bare tree branches, the lines of the white Docomo Yoyogi building were perfectly straight, as if it had been cut out of the sky. The chill of the winter earth that rose from the grass to the small of his back was equally balanced by the warmth of the bright sun and by Miho's body heat as she leaned lightly against his arm.

Girls are so soft.

The moment he became conscious of the sensation, he wanted nothing more than to hold Miho tight and never let go.

Then, before he knew it, before he could even think, Takao had kissed her on the lips. The contact didn't even last a second, but the euphoria of that moment sent a thrill of delight all the way down to his toes.

And then he remembered what his mother had said, and everything turned to ice. "I still remember how happy that kiss made me. It was my first year of middle school…"

"—Let's go home."

The irritation had taken over so suddenly that even he was startled, and before he even noticed the words leaving his mouth, his feet were carrying him away. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Miho, still sitting in shock, but his rapid strides did not slow.

"Huh? Hey, Fujisawa, wait just a minute!"

You need to tell her you're sorry now. You should stop. You should wait. The thoughts were in his head, but they didn't transfer to his body. Hastily grabbing the thermos Takao had abandoned, Miho ran after him until her head was alongside his shoulder.

"Hey, what's wrong? What happened?" She looked up into his face, worried. It made him shut down even harder.

He walked briskly and silently back down the road through the park toward Shinjuku Station. Petite Miho almost had to run to keep up; he could tell from the sound of her footsteps. Even without turning around, Takao was painfully aware that she was about to cry. The shadows of the trees along the street streamed under his feet, blurring together one after another. Before he knew it, black clouds had filled the sky; the sun had set behind the buildings, the streetlamps had begun to glow, and the temperature was coming down.

They reached the South Gate of Shinjuku Station in less than half the time it had taken them to reach the shrine. Once they were there, Takao finally turned to Miho. She held the thermos out to him, and he awkwardly took it.

"…Thanks. Sorry," he said with some difficulty, staring at the floor by her feet.

"Mm-hmm…" Miho's response sounded like a sigh. That was when Takao noticed her shoes, a pair of low heels with ribbons on them. She was holding one heel off the ground. Had he made her get a blister? There was a faint sheen of sweat on Miho's forehead; once her breathing had slowed a bit, some of the strength returned to her voice.

"I was glad I got to see you today, Fujisawa… It had been a little while."

It was evening, and the crowds in front of the ticket gate were getting even denser, surrounding them with thousands of conversations and footfalls.

"Will you be coming to school tomorrow?" Miho's question sounded a bit like a challenge.

Takao didn't know how to answer; he kept staring at the floor. The temperature had fallen a little further again. His toes were cold. He was pretty sure Miho's were even colder.

"…You know, you're not the only one who thinks you've got it worse than everybody else. It's pathetic."

Startled, he looked up. For a moment, he thought the words had come from a passing stranger, but Miho was glaring at him with tears beading in her eyes. *I have to say something*, Takao thought. But what was there to say…? He struggled desperately to find the answer, as if this were a test and he had only one minute left on the clock, and he grabbed the first one that came to mind.

"It's got nothing to do with you, Kasuga."

His voice was shaking a little, and he was surprised by how childish his own words sounded. But Miho didn't flinch.

"You're right. It doesn't. But Fujisawa, there must be ten kids in each grade with divorced parents. It's nothing special, like, at *all*, and sulking over it like this just makes you look dumb."

Takao's face flushed bright red before he even identified the feeling as shame. He stared at Miho in disbelief. Who on earth was this slight girl in front of him?

"If you don't want to come to school, you're free to skip. But don't think you're making some sort of statement. I thought you were mature, Fujisawa, but I was dead wrong. You don't even know how to treat people!"

Stunned, Takao gazed at the tears spilling from Miho's eyes. The Miho I know, the one who walked miles and miles with me, would never have said anything this forceful, he thought. She can see everything I'm feeling, and what have I seen about her?

Miho looked down, then walked away with a quiet parting shot.

"—And after you finally worked up the nerve to kiss me, too."

Her small form passed through the ticket gate and rapidly vanished into the crowd.

He walked all the way home from Shinjuku, about two hours. The idea of taking the crowded outbound train was too much for him right now. It had started to drizzle soon after he set out, and by the time he passed Nakano, it was raining in earnest, but Takao just bowed his head and kept going. The rain was on the cusp of turning to snow, chilling him to the point of pain, while his too-new sneakers made friction sores on his feet. The pain was oddly comforting, and he wasn't sure how to feel. He almost hoped he'd get lost for real, although he knew it couldn't possibly count as punishment. Even so, when the public apartment building began to come into view beyond the rain, illuminated by the streetlights, Takao was so relieved, he almost burst into tears.

It wasn't a workday, but no one was home when he got back.

But that was nothing new these days. His brother worked late on the weekends as well, and his mom was probably off on a date somewhere with some random middle-aged guy.

After a cursory rubdown with a bath towel, he changed clothes. Then, still freezing and emotionally overwhelmed, Takao crouched down in the entryway and opened the shoe rack.

A multicolored assortment of women's shoes reflected the light dully, like shells with curious shapes on display in a museum. Orthodox brown mules, dressy open-toed black heels, ankle boots and knee-high boots, sneakers with chunky soles that seemed too young for her, mustard-colored wedges, deep-purple high heels—every pair in the rack was one his mother wore frequently during winter alone; there were easily five times this many shoes in the hall closet, stuffed into boxes. Takao started taking pairs off the rack, putting shoe trees into the ones that didn't have them, using a brush to dust them off as best he could when his hands were shaking with cold, working an emulsifying cream into shoes that needed it, then polishing them with a cotton rag. He was used to this work, and little by little, it calmed him down. The heater finally began to warm up the room, and gradually, his shivering subsided.

His mother loved shoes, and maintaining them had been Takao's job since he was very young. As a grade schooler, Takao had been fascinated by women's multifarious shoes the way other kids his age loved model trains or robots. His feelings toward his mother were completely different from what they had been back then, but this habit still relaxed him. When he focused on shoes, he could clear his mind completely.

That was why Takao didn't hear the approaching footsteps, and he didn't realize his brother was home until the door opened with a heavy metallic *clank*.

His brother, who was wearing a loose overcoat, startled when he saw Takao in the entryway. "I'm home," he murmured curtly, folding his umbrella and taking off his leather shoes. Snow slid from the umbrella and plopped down right in front of him. "Yeah," Takao mumbled, edging closer to the wall without looking up. The standard return greetings used to come easily to him, but now the words wouldn't come out.

After he had finished polishing and was closing the shoe rack, he heard his brother's contemptuous voice. "You're still doing that?" His suit had been replaced with a hoodie, and he held a can of beer in one hand. Takao felt as if he'd entered some stranger's house without permission.

"It's nothing… I just felt like it," he answered awkwardly.

"You're such a weird kid, you know that?"

The moment he heard the words, a violent impulse to yell welled up inside him, but he didn't know what he should yell or whom to yell at, so he swallowed it all down. It was just like the beer; swallowing just brought tears to his eyes. As his brother receded into the living room, he could see Miho disappearing through the ticket gate and his father walking out the door. *Everybody turns into a stranger with me.*

"That's what I mean by acting spoil……take this?!"

Somewhere in his aching head, his sodden brain, he heard snatches of what sounded like an argument.

"…running away because you can't handle……he's still just a kid…"

"What about me?"

“You think I don’t feel like crying, too?!”

Heavy footsteps, striding across the floor, then a sharp *bang!* as the sliding door slammed shut.

When he opened his heavy eyelids a crack, the light streaming in only made his headache worse. Blurry as she was, he saw his mother sitting across the table from him. Her elbows were on the table, her face was buried in her hands, and her shoulders were shaking.

“…Are you crying?” Takao asked in a small voice.

His mother raised her head, smiling at him, her mascara streaked and running.

“You’re crying, too, silly.”

And Takao realized his cheeks were wet. …Oh, right. I didn’t want to go back to our room with my brother, so I was in the kitchen drinking Mom’s shochu, and I fell asleep.

“Cut that out already. If you drink any more of my liquor, I’m gonna start charging for it.”

“Ha-ha.” Laughing made his head throb. *You were the one who offered it to me, remember?* Dimly, Takao remembered that there was something he had to say to her.

“…Mom.”

“Hmm?”

“You guys got divorced three years too early. I’m still a kid.”

When his mother heard that, tears welled up in her eyes. She smiled and looked down to hide it.

“Oh, I know, Takao. I’m sorry.”

The heat of his own tears on his cheeks was almost pleasant as Takao slipped back into a drunken sleep.

Takao’s worries proved to be unfounded. When he went to school again for the first time in two weeks, none of his classmates gave him strange looks. The most he got was “Hey, you showed,” from his guy friends and “Oh, Fujisawa. It’s been a while, huh?” and some laughter from the girls. Even the teachers only gave him a brief warning not to skip again when they took attendance. To Takao, all the reactions were more embarrassing than reassuring.

During lunch, he went to the third-years’ classroom and looked for Miho Kasuga. He didn’t find her, and after school, he looked again to no success. He wondered if he’d made her catch a cold.

He’d already decided what he’d say when he saw her. First, he’d apologize for the incident at the park. After that—he’d tell her about his decision. He wouldn’t be able to manage it right away, but he would become an adult by the time he changed from Fujisawa to Akizuki—by the time he graduated from middle school. More specifically, he’d stop drinking and skipping school because he was sulking and wanted somebody to pay attention to him. He’d know what he was looking for, and what he wanted to

say to whom, the way Miho did. And he'd tell her that he wanted to go walking in parks together again, if she did.

Eventually, he gave up and decided to try again tomorrow, and he was headed for the school gate when he passed a girl he recognized. She was a third-year student he'd seen with Miho a few times.

"Um, excuse me."

"Hmm? You're Fujisawa, aren't you."

"Huh? How did you know my…?"

"You talked to Miho sometimes, didn't you? She told me about you, too."

"…I see. Um, was Kasuga not in school today?"

The girl looked at him with confusion that gradually turned to pity.

"You mean she didn't tell you?"

That was when Takao learned that Miho's parents had divorced, and she'd already moved away.

He didn't have a cell phone, so he had no way to contact her. Miho was two years older, so he didn't know what she'd seen in him, or wanted to see. After he learned the news, he asked Miho's friend to send her one brief text from him.

I've decided to grow up, it said.

It was several weeks before he received a response, again through the friend:

Give it your best, Takao Akizuki.

* * *

He's on the far side of the bridge, and the sound of the rain changes slightly yet again.

He can hear the rustling of the leaves, which is louder than the splashes on the water. The clear twitter of a mountain white-eye twines around the noise of his moccasins slowly compressing the soil. He can see the surface of the water beyond the black pines, reflecting the pink of the azaleas, the red bark of the umbrella pines, the dazzling green of the maple leaves. A large-billed crow calls assertively in the distance. *Come to think of it, Miho taught me their names long ago*, Takao remembers. The memory feels like a distant light, and he has to squint against it.

From the far reaches of the sky, another rumble reaches his ears.

The thunder whispers.

The phrase abruptly surfaces in Takao's mind, then vanishes.

What was that? Had he heard the words somewhere? He can't even remember the phrase itself now, although it was in his mind only a moment ago. Something like a premonition quietly fills him.

Beyond the wet maple leaves, the arbor where he always shelters from the rain comes into view. But it's already occupied. Takao steps closer, but he feels as if he's seeing something that shouldn't exist. The veil of leaves falls behind him, revealing the whole structure.

The intruder is a woman in a suit.

Takao stops in his tracks.

The woman is holding a can of beer near her lips, and her soft hair is trimmed evenly above her shoulders. She casually glances his way. For just a moment, their eyes meet.

In that moment, for no reason, Takao thinks, *The rain might stop soon.*

Urasaburu / kokorosama neshi / hisakata no ame no shigure no / nagarau mireba

(*Man'yoshu* volume 1:82)

Translation: Forlorn thoughts / fill my breast / when I see cold rain streaming / from the vast, endless sky

Context: One of the three poems that Nagata-ou wrote at the spring of Yamanobe during April of year 5 of the Wadou era (712), when he was sent to Itsuki no Miya in Ise. Itsuki no Miya was the palace where unmarried imperial princesses lived when they were sent to the Ise Grand Shrine to serve. The word *shigure* technically refers to the cold rain that falls from autumn to early winter, and it doesn't match the season in which the poem was written. The cold *shigure* rain falling on his journey to Ise echoes the anguish in his heart.

CHAPTER TWO

Soft Footsteps, a Thousand Years Unchanging, Everybody Has Their Quirks.
—Yukino

When she looks up at the sound of soft footsteps, she sees a boy standing under a vinyl umbrella.

For just a moment, she accidentally makes eye contact. Yukino looks down, finding it odd that she didn't notice him until he was so close. Maybe it was because she was listening to the rain.

Hesitantly, the boy steps into the small arbor where Yukino is sheltering from the weather. It's unusual for someone like him to be visiting the park on a weekday morning. He seems fairly serious—he's even wearing his uniform. A high schooler? Probably. Paying to get into a traditional Japanese garden is a pretty highbrow way to skip school. She gets up and moves to the back of the arbor to give him room. The boy ducks his head politely, folds his umbrella, and sits down at the far end, making the wooden bench creak faintly.

The heavy May rain is falling straight down. Around them are the cool, comfortable-sounding calls of birds, the rain drumming on the roof and dripping from the eaves, and the quiet, gentle scratch of a pencil skating over a notepad. For a while now, the boy has been writing something in a notebook. He doesn't have a textbook open, so he probably isn't studying, but—Yukino is vaguely relieved that he isn't the type to listen to music.

The L-shaped bench is small, only about six feet square, but even at opposite ends of that small space, it's odd how small a distraction they are to each other. *This'll work*, she thinks, raising her open beer can to her lips again. Alcohol isn't allowed in this park, but oh well. The kid probably wouldn't care. After all, they're both skipping.

All of a sudden, with a small, startled "Ah!" the boy drops his eraser. It bounces toward Yukino, rolling to a stop by her foot.

"Here you go." She holds out the eraser she's picked up.

"Oh, thank you!" Hastily, the boy half stands to take it.

His voice is young, a teenager's voice, and somehow pleasant. She smiles.

The boy goes back to work on whatever he's writing in his notebook, and Yukino realizes she's beginning to feel a burst of energy for the first time in quite a while… Over something like this. Which is strange, because she was about to write today off as a bust the same way she has every other day in the recent past. *Weird*, she thinks, taking a mouthful of beer and gazing out over the rainy garden again.

The rain has been falling with a steady intensity for a while now. When she stares at all the different shapes of the pine trees, they begin to look like enormous vegetables or the silhouettes of strange animals. The sky is uniformly gray, as if someone has put a lid right over Tokyo. The rings of

ripples expand across the pond, one after another, meeting like an endless conversation. The sound of the rain on the roof is like a clumsy xylophone performance, with a rhythm that you can almost count out, but not quite. *Heh, just like me. I really have no sense of rhythm. My mother could play the piano, and she was good at singing. Wonder why I suck at music so much?* When she was a child, everyone else in her class had played the xylophone so smoothly, it was enchanting. The way their fingers had moved on their recorders was like magic. *Come to think of it, why is everybody in the world so good at karaoke? Why do they know so many songs, and how can they keep right on singing with no hesitation? They don't teach you karaoke in school. No special classes for it. Does everybody secretly train on their own? He took me to karaoke sometimes, too, but—*

"Um, excuse me…"

The boy abruptly speaks to her, and she answers with a startled "Huh?"

"Have we met somewhere before?"

"Mm? …No." What? Where did this come from? Is he trying to pick me up? …In a school uniform? Her reply is a little stiff.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were somebody else," the boy says awkwardly, looking down in shame.

The sight reassures Yukino. "It's all right," she tells him, warmer this time. His excuse is genuine, she can tell.

She takes another swallow of beer. Another soft rumble of thunder sounds in the distance, like a gentle nudge. With the can still to her lips, Yukino steals a glance at the boy.

His hair is cropped short. He has a clever-looking forehead, and his eyes and eyebrows seem slightly obstinate. Their exchange a few moments ago seems to have embarrassed him; his cheeks are still a little flushed. There's something oddly mature about the leanness of the area between his ears and his neck. On his slender frame, he wears a dazzlingly bright white uniform shirt and a gray vest…

Hmm? Yukino thinks.

She's a little startled, and a tiny gasp slips out. *Oh, I see. That explains it.* A mischievous impulse spreads through her, like watercolor paint dripped onto the surface of a puddle.

"—We may have met, actually."

"Huh?"

Startled, the boy looks at Yukino. More distant thunder, as if to fill the pause. The word *narukami*, "roar of the gods," drifts into her mind. Smiling slightly, Yukino speaks quietly.

"'The thunder whispers…'"

Picking up her bag and umbrella, she stands up.

"'…and clouds darken the sky. / If rain should fall, / would you stay with me?'"

Before she finishes the poem, she's begun walking. She puts up her umbrella and steps out, and it becomes a speaker wrapping her up in the

sound of rain. She feels the boy's stunned gaze on her back, but she keeps walking anyway. *I wonder if that gave him a clue. Heh-heh!* she thinks as she crosses the little stone bridge, heading for the park's entrance. *He probably can't see me anymore through the trees. Today was kinda fun.* Even as she thinks that, a realization hits her: *Oh. Today's nowhere close to over.* Slowly, her vivid feelings sink back into gray.

* * *

It had happened when Yukino was in middle school, during her classics class.

As an introduction to tanka poetry, one poem each from the *Man'yoshu*, the *Kokinshu*, and the *Shin Kokinshu* had been printed in her textbook. Of these, for reasons she didn't understand, thirteen-year-old Yukino's eyes had been drawn to the poem from the *Man'yoshu*.

As the meadow glows with predawn light / from the east / I turned / and glimpsed / the setting moon.

Even before she could think about the poem's meaning, the textbook's black type dissolved, replaced by a purple dawn sky on the horizon of a plain. When she turned to look across the landscape, a white moon hung in the ultramarine sky like a drawing, all alone above a mountain ridge. It was the first time printed letters had ever created such a clear, evocative image in her mind. *What in the world…?!* As she sat there, stunned…

"I bet it was a view like this one."

…her teacher's gentle voice drew her back to class. Ms. Hinako picked up a piece of chalk and began cheerfully drawing a picture on the blackboard—the small silhouette of a man on horseback. Around him was a sky tinted with a gradation of pink, yellow, aqua, and deep blue. Finally, using white chalk, she drew in a tiny moon. Yukino felt goosebumps on her skin from head to toe. *That's exactly what I saw!*

When she told Ms. Hinako about it in the art room after school, the teacher yelped with excitement like a little girl.

"What?! Oh wow! That's incredible! Maybe Hitomaru possessed both of us at once!"

"Gah, occult stuff," said the boys in the art club.

"We knew Ms. Hinako was pretty close to the edge, but I didn't know you were into that, too, Yukinon," the girls teased.

"No, no, I was just startled," Yukino told them, pouting. Everyone stared at her, and a moment later, a faint sense of hostility rose from the group.

Oh, not again, Yukino thought hopelessly, but Ms. Hinako broke in with a very teacherly voice.

"Even after a thousand years, people never change. Don't you just love the classics?"

The students responded with various comments ("Well yeah, maybe" and "Still a tough class, though"), and Ms. Hinako gave a gentle chuckle. Everything stayed smooth and amicable. The low evening sun that came in through the windows brought Ms. Hinako's plump silhouette and the

students' uniformed figures into sharp relief, as if they were in a painting. Feeling relieved, Yukino thought, *She's right. Ms. Hinako not only saved me again, but she just knows how to put things into words. She's so, so fantastic.* She felt as if one more cog had clicked into place in the blank space between her and the world. *Ms. Hinako always saves me, over and over.*

Throughout her childhood in Ehime Prefecture, Yukino had been more beautiful than any of the people around her, and that beauty generally brought her misfortune.

She was so lovely, it was unreal, even bizarre. No matter where she went in her little town among the mountains and ocean and rice paddies and reservoir ponds and tangerine groves, she drew unwanted attention. The double takes every time she passed someone on the street were painful to her. Was her face really so strange? As a young child, the idea had worried her very much.

In her sparsely populated elementary school, her distress was even worse. When she lined up with her classmates, her head was unnaturally petite and dainty; her limbs were long, pale, and so slender they seemed alarmingly fragile; her delicate features could have been someone's intentional handiwork; her eyes were especially large and double-lidded; her irises were a gleaming, mysterious black; and her long, pensive eyelashes were so thick, it seemed you could rest a pencil on them. Her timid, frightened comportment was interpreted as a strangely mature sensuality that only drew more attention to her. Like a ship with white sails floating on a vast gray ocean, Yukino naturally drew the eye—even though it was the last thing she wanted.

Yukino's presence in a room would instantly change the mood. The boys would get antsy, which would upset the girls. Whether Yukino was using an eraser or serving school lunches or drinking milk or getting an answer wrong, she was unsettlingly picture perfect. And that uncanny trait of hers meant all the teachers, without realizing it, tended to speak to her more than to the others, and this isolated her even further from her surroundings. To make matters worse, she was clumsy and bad at things like gym and music, and her anxiety didn't help at all. She couldn't even walk straight across the balance beam or play the castanets. No one would have cared about her little mistakes if they had been another girl's, but because she was Yukino, it always left an impression. And now that they had a justifiable reason to ostracize this alien, the children didn't even hide their whispers: *She's kind of a weirdo, huh?* Yukino lived with her breath in her throat, trying not to attract the slightest bit of attention.

Ever since she'd started middle school and had first met Ms. Hinako, Yukino had been desperately jealous of her. She was a Japanese-language teacher in her midtwenties with everything Yukino lacked: a plump, kind face without a single edge in sight; a soft, round, and utterly huggable figure; and a tranquil demeanor that put everyone around her at ease. She

also had a friendly, unaffected presence that made everyone call her Ms. Hinako instead of Ms. Ogawa.

She's in perfect sync with the rest of the world, Yukino thought. *My looks set me apart from everyone, but Ms. Hinako's round face is like the embodiment of everything good in the world.* She wished over and over that she'd been born with her teacher's looks. Night after night, with ridiculous gravity, Yukino visualized herself waking in the morning to discover that she now looked like Ms. Hinako.

Before long, she realized with some astonishment that Ms. Hinako could even blur the sharp contrast between Yukino and her peers. Whenever the mood started shifting because of Yukino, Ms. Hinako skillfully set things right again. Whenever eyes began to focus on Yukino, she'd casually interject—whether consciously or not—and the gentle chiding would redirect everyone's attention. Thanks to that, even Yukino's classmates were gradually adapting to her singularity.

For all three years, Yukino wished that Ms. Hinako would become her homeroom teacher. But luck was not on her side, so instead she joined Ms. Hinako's art club. It is no exaggeration to say that the time she spent there was her salvation. For what was very nearly the first time, school stopped being agony for her. The shapeless school jumpers still drew out Yukino's beauty like a tailor-made outfit, but it was in that club that she discovered the joy of talking with friends her own age. All of this was thanks to Ms. Hinako.

When Yukino thought of her, her heart ached with longing, a feeling not unlike romantic love that could bring her near tears. Ms. Hinako was her idol.

By the time she was in high school, Yukino's beauty was somewhat less startling to those around her. Of course, she was an exceptionally beautiful girl in such a stylish uniform—a madder-red ribbon, a mocha-colored blazer that encased her rounded bosom, and a pleated tartan check skirt whose length offered just a glimpse of her slim thighs. She looked like one of the idol singers on TV, but at least that was a familiar role for her looks to occupy. She was now attending a prep school that required a trip by bicycle, then train, then bicycle again—there were rumors that there was "a total knockout" at her school. But her beauty was simply different now, not abnormal. Another cog clicked into place. Breathing got just a little easier.

"Boy, I haven't seen you in ages, Yukinon. You're a lot more…human now."

So said one of her fellow club members from middle school when they met up in the art room at their old school for the first time in two years. Ms. Hinako was being transferred, and so the art club, alumni and all, was throwing a farewell party for her over the weekend. The weather had been rainy since that morning, and even with the heater on, their breath was faintly visible in the old building. It was a cheerful gathering, though, and the enthusiasm of the thirty or so students created a comfortable contrast to the cold cola on their throats.

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?! You saying I didn’t look human before?” Yukino asked her as jokingly as she could.

“Yeah, you were like somethin’ else entirely!”

The current art club members just laughed, unaware that the girl was dead serious, until the other former members started arguing back.

“No, really, y’all! That’s the truth.”

“*Pfft!* Whaddaya mean she ain’t human?” The middle-school boys seemed to find this hilarious. They’d been blushing and sneaking glances at Yukino for a while now, but it didn’t create the same awkward tension as before. Next to Yukino, Ms. Hinako peered at her warmly.

“It’s true, though. Yukino, you look so refreshed. It’s like you just climbed out of the pool,” she said. *She really does understand everything, doesn’t she?* Yukino thought contentedly.

Darkness had fallen outside. With night on one side and pale fluorescent light on the other, the rain-spangled windows became mirrors that reflected the art club. The middle schoolers began to split up into groups and head home, until only five former students and Ms. Hinako were left. When Yukino saw the pile of boxes behind her former teacher, now empty of the gifts they had contained, it finally hit her that Ms. Hinako was really leaving.

“If anything happens, y’all can stop by anytime,” Ms. Hinako had told the club on graduation day, and the words had remained in Yukino’s heart like a special message just for her. As a matter of fact, she’d found excuses to visit her old middle school time and time again.

“I’ll be at another school, but I’m not going too far. We’ll see each other again,” Ms. Hinako said, but Yukino was certain this was a permanent change. She stole a glance at the teacher. Maybe it was the fluorescent lights, but she looked rather tired and worn as she smiled and laughed with her students. It worried Yukino a little as she reflected, *I’m much better now, I think—but back in middle school, I was practically a stalker. I hunted her down during lunch and after school and after club on days when we didn’t have school, like a chick searching for its mother. I would have gone back home to her apartment with her if I could. When boys sneak around following me now that I’m in high school—I get it. I really do.* As she watched the raindrops grow and trickle down the windowpanes when the weight became too much, Yukino was reminded of how her own feelings had swelled in her isolation. Of the tremendous pain it had brought.

“There’s a poem called ‘Words of Rain.’”

When Yukino looked up from her reverie, Ms. Hinako was watching her and smiling. Then her eyes slowly moved across each of her other students, too.

“It’s one of my favorites. I remember that poem every time it rains.”

She lowered her eyes slightly, reciting from memory.

I’m a little chilled because

I’ve been wandering in the drizzling rain

all alone
My palms, my forehead, are damp
When did I become so dark?
I'm leaning here like this
waiting for the lights to come on

As the words fell from her teacher's plump lips, Yukino didn't even realize at first that her own mouth had dropped open. "'Outside, the rain is still faint and noiseless,'" she continued, painting a vision behind Yukino's eyelids of fine rain falling over a city she had never seen. For some reason, the voice of her beloved Ms. Hinako set her heart trembling slightly, like a disquieting prophecy from the distant future.

Telling me of a day,
of quietness, of hot noontides
I didn't know, didn't even wish for
the faint murmur of rain unexpectedly
shifts, like so, through various shapes
and as I listen to it,
someday I'll sleep as I always do

* * *

Her alarm is ringing.

Eyes still shut, she closes her hand around her phone and silences it. *Morning already?* she thinks in disbelief, and when she opens her eyes a crack, her head throbs. It's like her blood is still full of last night's alcohol, but she has to get up. When she swings her feet onto the floor, her stomach pain and anemia almost send her right down to the floor. *I need calories*, she thinks. Picking up a chocolate bar from the floor by her feet, she sits down on the bed, strips off the foil wrapper, and takes two desperate bites. It's 6:04, and Yukino finally registers that it's raining outside.

…The faint murmur of rain. Telling me of a day I didn't know, didn't even wish for.

Sure got that right, Yukino thinks. It's exactly like that. Every damn day.

She leaves her apartment and boards the old, clanking elevator. On the third floor, a middle-aged man in a suit steps on with a "Good morning!" that's much too energetic for such an early hour, and Yukino manages to muster up a smile and return the greeting. "Good morning." Even with her eyes on the floor, she can feel the man staring openly at her reflection in the glass of the elevator. It's all right. He can't find any fault with me. A tight umber jacket with a wine-red ruffled blouse underneath, black flared pants, and two-and-a-half-inch pumps. Black hair in a short, tidy bob; appropriate foundation; light lipstick that stays in the lines. I'd be embarrassed to be you, with that worn-out suit and the whiskers you missed when you shaved your chin and uncombed bedhead. My nails are polished, and my nylons make my legs trim and tidy. The helpless child from back then is gone. I know what to do with my appearance now. I'm doing everything right.

Cars come and go on rainy Gaien Nishi-dori, and the colorful umbrellas on its sidewalks are walking silently in the same direction. Yukino keeps pace with the rest of them, and by the time she's shaking out her umbrella at Sendagaya Station, she's already exhausted. Valiantly resisting the urge to lean against a pillar and just sit down, she fishes her commuter pass out of her bag and goes through the automatic ticket gate. Blinking back tears, she desperately climbs the stairs, reaches the platform, joins the lines waiting for the train, leans on her umbrella as if on a walking stick, and heaves a sigh of relief. *I finally get to rest my legs*, she thinks. But the exercise has raised her blood pressure enough to create a sharp pain in her head, as if someone's swinging a hammer around inside her skull. A greasy sweat breaks out on her temples, and yet her fingers and toes are as cold as ice. Her thin legs seem ready to snap from fatigue. How could a ten-minute walk from her apartment wear her out so completely? It's pathetic.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh!"

Yukino flinches and looks over to see who's laughing so rudely and finds a cheery pair of high school girls in short skirts are gabbing away.

"A kalbi rice bowl?! For breakfast?!"

"Well, we've got gym during second period today! My mom barely gives me anything for breakfast. If that was all I had, I'd pass out, I swear."

"No, but like, nobody eats those anymore. There's that new panini shop by the shrine, remember? At least go there!"

With each retort, they bat at each other like kittens teasing with their front paws; in between jabs, they dexterously swipe and tap their smartphones, laughing in sharp bursts.

As Yukino listens to their conversation ("So, what, are panini the next big thing?" "Yeah, nobody does pancakes anymore."), she's impressed by their energy. *They're having this much fun just standing on a station platform?* she marvels.

"The train bound for Shinjuku is arriving on track one," the speaker says in a monotone. Yukino's willpower is already near the breaking point, and all the little things at once finally push her over the edge. Nausea works its way up from the pit of her stomach.

Umbrella in hand, Yukino is walking through the enormous national park that straddles the wards of Shinjuku and Shibuya.

She didn't take the train. She wasn't able to. Before the doors opened, Yukino dashed into the station bathroom and threw up. It was agonizingly painful, as if her stomach were being turned inside out, but almost nothing came up. Only thick, stringy phlegm dribbled from her mouth. As she fixed her tear-streaked makeup in the bathroom mirror, she thought with some despair, *I won't make it onto the train today, either. I knew I wouldn't.* Still, once she'd reached that conclusion, a guilty relief rose inside her. She left the station for the park, which was about five minutes away on foot, and passed through its Sendagaya gate.

The trees around her are drenched with rain, and they shine with a green that seems to spill over from the inside, a color unique to this season. Both the violent rumble of the Chuo Line and the roar of the trucks on the Metropolitan Expressway are gently attenuated into distant whispers here. It feels like a reassuring blanket of protection. As she walks along, listening to the rain drumming on her umbrella, she imagines she can feel her earlier exhaustion slowly washing away. She doesn't care that her pumps are getting muddy; the moist ground feels nice under her feet. She crosses the lawn, takes the small path, almost like a mountain track, that runs beside the Taiwanese-style building, and enters the Japanese garden. Once again, no one's there yet. Relieved, she ducks under low-hanging maples, crosses a small stone bridge, enters the usual arbor, and folds her umbrella. Once she sits down on the bench, she becomes aware of a heavy numbness creeping through her, as if her whole body is low on oxygen. *I need calories.* She opens a can of beer that she bought at the station kiosk, gulps it down, then heaves a long, deep sigh. The strength drains out of her until her heart feels ready to collapse in a wet heap. Tears well at the corners of her eyes before she can even grasp why. Today has only just begun, after all.

"Of a day I didn't know, didn't even wish for…"

Yukino murmurs the words softly.

* * *

After the party, a handful of former students helped clean up the art room, and by the time they were done, it was around six o'clock. It was already dark and cold, and the rain was still falling. By then, the cheerful mood of the day had shifted completely into the melancholy of parting, and after a round of tearful good-byes with Ms. Hinako, the graduates headed back home. Yukino and Ms. Hinako happened to be going in the same direction, so they were left walking side by side under their umbrellas.

Between the happiness of being alone with her teacher and the forlornness of wondering if this was the last time, Yukino hadn't been able to say anything for a little while. Ms. Hinako was also unusually quiet. Yukino realized she was the taller one now, and that made her even sadder, as if her height were part of the reason her teacher was leaving her.

A sudden, unbidden thought crossed her mind. *This won't be the last time I feel this way.* She hadn't dated anybody yet, but she was strangely convinced that it would bring her this same kind of sorrow.

"Your place is across the tracks, isn't it, Miss Yukino?"

As if she'd suddenly remembered, Ms. Hinako glanced over toward the Yosan Line.

"Yes," Yukino answered, her heart beating a bit faster.

"Not much farther, then," her teacher said, and the silence returned. The sounds of the teacher's boots and Yukino's loafers echoed by turns. The black rain was falling in straight lines down into the reservoir pond below the guardrail. When the quiet became unbearable, Yukino opened her

mouth to say something, anything, but Ms. Hinako quietly broke the silence a second before her.

"I'm not actually transferring. I'm quitting."

"Huh?"

What? What did she just say? Yukino peeked under Ms. Hinako's umbrella to get a look at her face, but the shadows were too deep.

"I won't be teaching anymore," Ms. Hinako said, a little more firmly than before. "I'm sorry, Miss Yukino. I thought I should tell you, if no one else."

Huh? What does she mean? Yukino couldn't seem to truly process what Ms. Hinako was saying. Her feet were just on autopilot now, carrying her forward. As Ms. Hinako went on, she couldn't tell if she was happy or sad.

"I'm pregnant, so I decided to move closer to my folks."

Why? Yukino thought. Why hadn't she said she'd gotten married? Why hadn't she said she was moving back home *with* her parents? Why had she lied and said she was transferring for work? These were easy things to understand, but she also couldn't understand them at all. Suddenly, it was hard to breathe, as if someone had roughly shoved her head underwater. The dominant emotion in her mind was the terror of abandonment—whether it was for her own sake or for Ms. Hinako's or it was completely unfounded, she wasn't sure. Either way, she was so upset, she was close to panic.

"Heh." Ms. Hinako's little huff was almost a laugh. It was the same gentle voice that had always saved Yukino when she felt the walls closing in. *Why is she laughing?* she wondered, looking at her teacher again.

"Did I surprise you? I'll admit, this wasn't really what anyone wanted. I know some hard times are coming. But listen…"

This time, it was Ms. Hinako's turn to look at Yukino's reaction from under her umbrella. A three-car train was just passing on the Yosan Line, on the other side of the rice paddies, and the yellow light from its windows softly illuminated Ms. Hinako's face. She was wearing that kind smile Yukino loved so much, the one that had always offered safety and encouragement. A hot lump welled up from deep inside her chest.

"It's all right. After all, everybody has their quirks."

Oh, Ms. Hinako.

What did she mean, "It's all right"? What did she mean, "Everybody has their quirks"? Still walking forward, Yukino started to cry. She stifled her sobs as best she could, but her tears spilled over, dripping to the asphalt alongside the rain. The medley of boots and loafers and raindrops lingered in her ears for a very long time.

* * *

The sound of familiar footfalls breaks into her light doze, and Yukino doesn't even have to look up to know who it is.

That boy is standing there, just like last time, under a vinyl umbrella.

He looks a little bewildered and a little angry, and Yukino finds it rather cute.

"Hello." She speaks to him first.

"…'Lo."

His response is so unfriendly, she can practically hear him thinking, Why is she here again? The boy sits down. Keeping him in the corner of her eye, Yukino smirks. He probably thinks I'm weird. But so are you, don't you think? You're skipping school again. And to come here, of all places.

The rain is drumming awkwardly on the roof. The boy has apparently decided to ignore Yukino; just as he did last time, he's writing or maybe drawing something in his notebook. Is he planning to go to an art school? *Well, makes no difference to me.* Yukino decides to drink her beer without bothering about him, either. She drains one can, then opens a can of another brand and puts it to her lips. If there's any difference between the two, she can't tell, and she feels a trace of regret. *Should've bought two cheap ones in that case. Eh, whatever. Not like I had much of a palate to begin with.* She slips one of her pumps halfway off, letting it dangle from her toes.

"Say…" Is she speaking to the boy because she's a little tipsy, or is she just bored? "Is your school on break?" Yukino absently muses that the two of them might get along, as if she's instinctively picking out potential friends from her class at the beginning of a new term.

The boy gives her a judgmental look and asks, "…Is your company closed?" in a deflated sort of way.

So he hasn't picked up on anything. Boys sure are dumb.

"I skipped again," she answers, and he looks just a little surprised. Maybe you didn't know, but adults skip out on their responsibilities all the time.

The boy's expression softens. "So you're drinking beer in the park before noon."

They both snicker a little. He's calling it like it is.

"You need to eat something. Beer all by itself isn't that great for you."

"You know a lot about it for a high schooler."

"Oh, it's not me; my mom drinks…"

He sounds a bit too flustered. *I bet he's probably had some himself. That's cute.* Yukino decides to tease him a little more.

"I've got snacks, too." She takes a whole bunch of chocolate out of the bag and shows it to him. "Want some?" she asks. She scoops up the boxes of chocolate with both hands and scatters them across the bench. The boy flinches back at the noise, just as she anticipated. Good.

"Aw. You just thought I was a crazy lady, didn't you."

"Oh, uh, no…"

"It's fine."

And it is; it really is. For the very first time, Yukino thinks so from the bottom of her heart.

"After all, everybody has their quirks."

The boy looks rather mystified. "…You think?"

"Yes."

When she meets his eyes, her lips soften. A gust of wind steps by to continue the conversation, and the young leaves and raindrops all ripple at once. As the rustling whisper of greenery surrounds them, Yukino suddenly realizes.

That rainy night…

What Ms. Hinako said, more than a decade ago…

For the very first time, she realizes her teacher wasn't fine at all. In an instant, everything is crystal clear to her, as if the other woman's heart has possessed her. She knows exactly what Ms. Hinako was feeling as she desperately held the weakening stitches of her heart together, as she proclaimed that she wasn't alone in her uniqueness. It's rising up before her as large as life. Earnestly defending herself to a high schooler far younger than she—it's exactly what Yukino's doing now.

Ms. Hinako, Yukino thinks, as if she's begging for forgiveness. We're all sick before we know it. But show me a "healthy adult" anyway. Who could pick one out of a crowd? And hey, at least we know we're sick. We've got it better than most, right? It's a prayer, or maybe a wish, as desperate as her girlhood spent idolizing Ms. Hinako.

"I'm heading out."

The boy gets to his feet. The rain has let up just a little.

"You're going to school now?"

"I decided I'd only skip on rainy mornings."

"You did, huh?" It's rather funny—he's strangely diligent about his delinquency. "We might meet again, then."

Then she adds:

"Just maybe. If it rains."

As the boy reacts with some confusion, Yukino distantly thinks, *Apparently I actually want that.*

Later, she learns that day was the official start of the Kanto area's rainy season.

Poem excerpt: Michizou Tachihara, "Words of Rain"

Narukami no / shimashi toyomoshi / sashikumori / ame mo furanu ka / kimi wo todomemu

(*Man'yoshu* volume 22:2513)

Translation: The thunder / whispers, / and clouds darken the sky. / If rain should fall, / would you stay with me?

Context: In the *Man'yoshu*, *shimashi toyomoshi*, translated here as "whisper," is written with the characters for "small movement," which can also be read as "*sukoshi toyomite*." *Kaminari*, or "thunder," was also called "*narukami*," "roar of the gods," and was seen as a mystical object of awe. This is a poem by a woman who wants to keep a man with her, although he seems about to leave. Rain would prevent him from going, so she wishes it would start suddenly. The man's poem in chapter 8 of this book is the response to this poem.

CHAPTER THREE

Leading Lady, Moving and the Faraway Moon, Teenage Dreams Change in Three Days.
—Shouta Akizuki

“They say your dreams don’t even last three days when you’re a kid, you know?”

The remark slips out after a sip of cloyingly sweet white house wine, and I notice how bitter I just sounded. *Dammit, I’m drunk*, I think as I swallow another mouthful of wine. My throat is so dry.

Rika’s knife pauses, and she shoots me a disapproving glare. Her eyes are big and dark and intense, and once upon a time I fell for them. That’s why the warning in them now makes me flinch.

“Meaning *I’m* still a kid? Or this your way of telling me to get a real job?”

“No, I meant in general. Don’t think so hard about it… It’s, you know, like advice from your grandma. Just in case.”

“Hmm…”

Rika doesn’t seem convinced, but even so, she looks down and goes back to cutting her white sea bass. “What do you mean, ‘grandma’? You’re twenty-six,” she grumbles under her breath. She brings the fork to her mouth, dabs at her lips with her napkin, takes a small sip of wine, then eats another mouthful of fish.

As I eat a forkful of my own fish and watercress, I push up the bridge of my glasses and steal a glance at Rika. The flame of the candle glistens against the olive oil on her lips in an oddly seductive way. Her slim fingers tear up some bread; she elegantly uses it to soak up some of the sea bass sauce, puts it in her mouth, chews for a while, then drinks more wine. She’s so used to this.

I’m captivated, but at the same time, I feel a dull pain, as though someone has reached into the soft, moist place behind my ribs, near my heart, and is gently squeezing it. Come to think of it, it’s always been this way. No matter where we were, restaurants or concert venues or love hotels, Rika always seemed to fit right in. On the other hand, I never knew any of this stuff until I met her. Case in point, I’m just now learning that it’s okay to use bread to sop up the sauce on your plate when you’re eating at French or Italian places.

I hook a finger into my necktie and loosen my collar just a little. No matter what I do, I always end up getting suspicious. I don’t want to think about it, but I can’t help it. She’s still in college, so who would have taught her about eating at restaurants? Probably a guy who’s older than me. Was it her ex, the one she said was six years older? I guess it could be one of the guests at the place where she works part-time. Or maybe the middle-aged guy who’s the director for her theater troupe. Was it before I started dating her, or after?

“But how can you expect to make your dreams come true without putting a lot of thought into it?” she asks abruptly, just as I’m cutting into the veal main course, and it takes me a second to realize she’s continuing our earlier conversation.

“…It’s not so much about putting thought into it. It’s more that whenever you talk about it, all I can see is how much pain it’s causing you. I know work and school are hard on you, but aren’t you a little too on edge? You started acting because you liked it, didn’t you? If it’s still hurting you…it makes me wonder.”

Even I don’t know whether this is a jab at Rika or an attempt to smooth her feathers. The waiter comes by and pours red wine into Rika’s glass, then fills mine. I realize the rim of my glass is sticky and smudged with oil, while Rika’s glass is still clean. Something’s different about the way we’re eating. I take a big gulp of wine to disguise that prickle of shame and make myself smile.

“Don’t push yourself too much. It’s hard to stick with anything if you’re not enjoying it.”

“Here’s the thing about plays…” Rika’s face is expressionless as she slowly washes down a bite of meat with wine. “Our director once said that he’s never had a desire to find fun or happiness in the craft. I know how he feels. Of course I’d love to make a living as an actress, but at the end of the day, I want to look back on my acting and know I created something good. I want to find my own unique mode of expression. I’m sure I won’t be able to achieve that if I don’t push myself beyond my limits. I think everybody in my theater troupe is like that.”

Looking back on her acting. Creating something good. Her own unique mode of expression. *My theater troupe. Our director.* The hand in my chest squeezes tighter. I hate this; maybe it’ll go away if I get more drunk. I tilt my glass, and an unfamiliar bitterness lingers on my tongue. *I wish this were shochu.* Another mouthful. My throat’s still dry.

“…Must be nice, working so hard with all your buddies.”

My sarcasm is finally too obvious. Right afterward, I mournfully think, *Welp, so much for this date*. To no one’s surprise, Rika is glaring at me.

“I didn’t come here to fight, you know.”

“You’re the one who started it.”

“I did not. Just stop, seriously.”

“You want *me* to stop? It’s been ages since I last got to see you, and you just…” *You just keep talking about stuff I can’t relate to.* But I really can’t say that, so instead I drink more wine. I can’t bring myself to eat any more meat. Dessert’s going to show up after this, too; how the hell am I supposed to pay for all this?

“What? If you’ve got something to say, Shou, just say it.”

“I don’t. Really.”

“That’s a lie; you’ve been so passive-aggressive these past few minutes. We’re going to be living together, so I don’t want any misunderstandings between us, okay? I was really looking forward to seeing you today.”

I come this close to saying, *Then look at me.* I buckled down today so I could leave work early, too. I’m the one who found this place and made reservations, and I’m the one who’s picking up the check. I want to hold on to this beautiful, arrogant college girl four years my junior; I want to passionately make my case to her, show her just how much effort I’m putting in to earning the privilege of dating her. But while I’m desperately repressing that impulse, another comment escapes my mouth.

“Just thinking how nice it must be to eat on someone else’s paycheck while you chase your dreams.”

Oh, I think hopelessly. *I really should not have said that.* I’m braced for her to cry or get up and walk out, but Rika only gives a small, inaudible sigh and looks down. She goes on cutting her veal into small pieces and slowly, wordlessly, putting them in her mouth. Every bite is like an accusation. Since there’s nothing else for me to do, I keep drinking that awful, bitter wine. She never asked me to reserve a pricey restaurant, I know. She never put her foot down and announced that she wouldn’t stand for a pub. I want her to see me as an adult, so I always make the reservations without asking her, and I always pick up the check on my own. The dryness in my throat refuses to go away.

I first met Rika Teramoto two years ago. My coworker Tanabe asked me if I’d buy a ticket to a play from him, and I forked over ¥2,800 without giving it too much thought. Plays weren’t my thing, so I must’ve been bored. It was a Saturday, if I recall, and the place printed on the ticket was somewhere in Shimokitazawa. I went down a narrow stairway in a mixed-use building, doubting whether there was even a theater here at all, got my ticket clipped by a sullen receptionist, and went into the venue. The place turned out to be about the size of a classroom and about as gloomy. The stair-stepped seating area was lined with about thirty floor cushions with no space between them, and I spent the two hours of the play rubbing shoulders with total strangers. I don’t know if I don’t appreciate plays or if the play was just bad, but it didn’t seem the slightest bit interesting to me. Actually, to be honest, it was so boring, it almost killed me. The plot was something like “Lost Generation–era high school students barricade themselves in a classroom because society is unfair,” and I was genuinely surprised that such a tedious story even existed. But the young woman who played the lead made an impression on me.

Wow, what a babe. Nice boobs and long legs. Watching her may be enough of a return on my investment. But my mental leering didn’t last long. At some point, the vivacity of this petite woman running around onstage had completely entranced me. The woman had so much energy that I started wondering where she kept it in a slim body like hers, and the way she moved wasn’t elegant so much as wild and desperate.

When I told Tanabe my impressions, in a diplomatic way, he very kindly set up a drinking party with this leading lady.

"*Actress* might not be the right word for what she is; I think she's just a regular college kid who wants to be in theater. I haven't met her, either, but you see a lot of girls like her," Tanabe explained during our lunch break in a soba shop near the office as he chewed on a piece of conger eel tempura. Tanabe's girlfriend had been in the group longer than the girl had, or something like that. Essentially, the spare ticket had changed hands several times and had made its way down to me.

And that's how the four of us—me, Tanabe, Tanabe's girlfriend, and the aspiring actress—ended up drinking together in a private room of a Shibuya pub. I remember having trouble deciding whether to wear my suit jacket or not, so it must've been around the end of summer. It was essentially a mixer party at a slightly upscale place, the type where they arrange seasonal fish in bamboo baskets and have you pick what you want. But Rika Teramoto showed up in a very plain outfit—T-shirt, shorts, and wedge sandals. It was vaguely reassuring.

"I'm Rika Teramoto. I'm from Osaka, but I moved to Tokyo last year. I'm in my second year at university now, and I'm in a theater group. Thank you very much for coming to our play the other day!" Rika bowed politely. Her speech was clear, but it still carried a trace of her home accent. I liked it.

The second time we ate together, I invited her out one-on-one. We made plans to meet for the third time before that day was over. I don't think it was even a month before I had switched from "Teramoto" to "Rika," and she had switched from "Akizuki" to "Shou." The suffocating humidity began to abate, the leaves on the trees along the streets were starting to change color, and by the time Rika had begun wearing a peacoat, we were lovers.

Although we were in a relationship, I don't know that I could have told you if it made me happy or not. I was head over heels for Rika's strong-willed eyes and her lithe body, but whenever I was with her, I found myself constantly fighting a sense of inferiority I'd never even noticed before.

Her theater troupe was not, as I had initially imagined, the grown-up version of a middle-school arts festival club. Everyone there was serious, aspiring to be a professional. The performances they held twice a year had to sell a certain number of tickets, they streamed their practice online once a month, and the troupe's leader-slash-director sometimes wrote scripts for late-night TV and radio dramas. Rika herself had made guest appearances with other troupes and performed as an extra in indie films and commercials, and she sometimes modeled for photo shoots. I never would have heard of those films in my day-to-day life, the photos had been for local informational magazines that introduced small businesses, and Tanabe hadn't been wrong when he said Rika wasn't unique—still, as far as I was concerned, her world was the world of "show business." She was barely an adult, and yet she'd come into contact with far more people, and had built up a greater variety of experiences, than I had in my years working. I'd

graduated from university and picked up a marketing job, following the traditional path, while Rika's world was teeming with the sort of people I'd never met. Every time I heard her gush about the events of "today's shoot," I felt a faint pang inside me. It was a complicated form of pain—a mixture of jealousy and inferiority and possessiveness and pride.

"I'm home," I mutter as I open the door to the apartment in the old housing complex.

After dinner, I walked Rika to the Touzai Line platform with all my drunkenness and discomfort in tow, then returned to the JR station and boarded a train. Inside the Sobu Line car were rows of ads for the smartphones my company handles, and it depressed me even more. A soccer player with unnaturally white teeth was holding up the latest model with a ridiculous fake smile. After thirty full minutes in that train, I got off at my local station, walked another fifteen minutes back to my public apartment building, and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. By that time, I'd almost sobered up. I'd spent the whole way home grumbling to myself: "I'm done with this. I'm done. I'm done." At first, I hadn't known what I was done with exactly, but the more I complained, the more the words gave definition to the feeling. I just couldn't handle it anymore—the jealousy toward some middle-aged theater troupe member I'd never even seen, the social requirement to act mature and understanding, the silent judgment from my boss for actually leaving the office on time so I could go through it all yet again.

"Welcome back," Mom calls from the kitchen. I change out of my suit and into a T-shirt, wash my face and hands, and go into the kitchen. She's sitting at the table by herself, drinking shochu. It feels like we haven't seen each other in a while. "Welcome back," she says again, quieter this time, and my "Yeah" in reply feels cold and brusque.

I don't want to drink any more alcohol, but my hands feel empty, and I end up opening the fridge and getting a can of beer anyway. I open the pull tab and sit down across from Mom. It's blindingly obvious that we're both in bad moods. After a long and unnatural silence while we nurse our drinks, it occurs to me that she's even less emotionally mature than I am, so I try to draw her out. "How've things been lately?"

"Well, I'm drinking alone at home, so take a wild guess."

I have no idea whether it's work or romance or something else that's giving her trouble, and I grope around at the back of my memory.

"Uh, what was his name again? Shimizu?"

"…Shouta, have you ever made the girl pay on a date?"

"Well, sometimes. My salary's not that high," I tell her, but the truth is, with Rika, I always pay the whole bill. Partly because she's a student, but mainly to show off.

"Don't lie. You're so old-fashioned about this stuff."

She points out my fib with incredible ease, which only makes my mood worse. Instead of answering, I gulp down more beer.

“Shimizu says he’s been having some trouble with work lately. I think it’s the times being what they are, but for about a month now, I’ve been covering the cost of our meals and taxis.”

I’ve never met him and never want to, but Shimizu’s the name of my mother’s boyfriend. Ever since she and my dad split three years ago, she’s been living the life of free love, and as far as I know, Shimizu’s her fourth guy. She’s forty-seven, and he’s twelve years younger, a freelance designer or something like that. I don’t know much about him, but I am impressed. He’s been going out with a divorced, spoiled woman with kids who’s twelve years older than he is for a year now. On top of that, at thirty-five, he’s got the woman paying for their dates. *You’re really something, Shimizu.* That’s not sarcasm or anything like it; I’m genuinely impressed.

After she’s run through some gripes about her job and Shimizu, Mom seems to be feeling better. “How about you, Shouta?” she asks. “Are you doing well? You came home smelling like wine; were you on a date?”

Setting an impromptu beer snack (salted fish guts on tofu) in front of her, I think for a little before I answer.

“Yeah, about that. I’ve decided to move out.”

“Whaaaaaaat?! When? Why, what for? By yourself? Who with?”

“We’re still looking for a place, but it’ll happen by the end of summer. We’ve got a bunch of reasons. This place is a little far from work, for one thing, and it’s pretty pathetic to keep living with my mom forever. Plus, I bet Takao could really use a room of his own already. I’m thinking of living near Gokokuji or Iidabashi or somewhere around there with my girlfriend—Teramoto, from Osaka? I’m pretty sure I told you about her before. I’ll introduce you one of these days.”

It’s not a lie that we’re considering moving in together, but we’re nowhere near ready to introduce each other to our parents. Saying something like that to my mother at all, I was probably motivated by more than a little spite. She doesn’t give me much of a reaction, though, and when I check to see if she’s okay, the regret is instant. There are tears in her eyes, and she’s biting her lip. Goddammit.

“What’s so pathetic about living with your mother?! You’re paying for yourself and helping with the rent! There’s absolutely no reason to be embarrassed!” Mom yells at me out of nowhere, so forcefully she might as well have hauled me up by the shirtfront. *I blew it.*

“No, like I said, it’s a pretty long commute to the office from here.”

“It’s not much closer from Gokokuji!”

“Yes, but with her university—”

“She’s a student?!”

“Didn’t I tell you before?”

“That’s the first I heard of it! You can’t even justify that to her parents!”

“I’ll call them.”

“Enough!” Mom stands up, cutting me off. “Then I’ll go live with my boyfriend, too!”

With that, she snatches up my half-empty can of beer and chugs it.

After my mother has drunk herself under the table with tears in her eyes, I help her over to her futon. My little brother went to bed ages ago; I step over him softly, so as not to wake him, climb into my own futon, and finally heave a deep sigh. It's past two in the morning. What a long waste of a night. Tomorrow morning, I have to head over to a client in Chiba. The more I try to fall asleep quickly, the less sleep wants to come.

I'm sorry about yesterday. I know you made time when you were tired, Shou, and I hate that we didn't have much fun. The food was fantastic. Let me treat you next time.

The text from Rika comes while I'm on a Keiyou Line train, returning to my office in Shiodome from the visit to my client. My knees go weak the moment I read her kind words, and I very nearly sit down on the floor. Right now, I'm on my way back from learning our client chose a competitor's cloud-based software over ours, and half a year's worth of work has gone down the drain.

I'm in my fourth year in sales for a telecommunications company, and that client is my treasure, the very first customer I won all on my own. They're a major all-around retailer with supermarkets and convenience stores nationwide; selling our product through them wholesale would have been a spectacular achievement for the entire sales team. Even our ever-cynical section chief has been unusually enthusiastic about it, and he's been backing me up and pushing this deal even among my own colleagues… And now that deal has fallen through. "We have a very strong relationship with N. Corp, you see. We thought your company's proposal might have enough advantages to outweigh it, so we stayed in talks with you, but it seems it wasn't meant to be this time." The bearer of the bad news was an oddly young manager, probably not much older than me. That was when I realized all the blood and sweat and tears I'd poured into this had been to help them negotiate another company down, and my vision literally went black.

Rika's text came at the perfect time, and I want to see her right away. I can't tell her that I just wiped out at work, but if I could just see her face…if I could touch her hair, hear her voice… If only she were here. I squeeze the ceiling strap harder, and the image of a lifeline springs to mind.

As I type out the beginnings of a reply, though, an e-mail comes in, and when I see the subject line, my pulse jumps. It's the daily business results report. Sometimes in old TV shows, you see business bar graphs stuck to the wall; my company sends out a similar daily report that covers a few more angles. Gingerly, I scroll down through the text, looking at the column for CORPORATE 1ST SALES DEPARTMENT, 3RD BUSINESS CONTROL DIVISION, SALES GROUP 2: SHOUTA AKIZUKI. Twelfth place out of fourteen. Once I report today's fiasco to my section chief, I'm going to be dead last. On top of that, I'll end up dragging the entire team down.

"You think you can just go out to dinner with a girl after this?" I mutter aloud. Before I know it, my desire to see Rika has wilted like a leaky

balloon. I look down at the lifeless storehouses streaming past below the elevated track, up at the carefree blue June sky above them, over the sports program commercial that's showing on the LCD screens over the doors. All of it is so ugly.

"Akizuki, let's take off for today. Wanna go watch Australia at that bar we went to that one time?"

"…Australia?"

"The final round of the Asian qualifiers. For the World Cup. The soccer thing?"

"Oh…right. Sorry, I really do want to get these materials put together by the end of the day, so I'm gonna work a little more."

Tanabe's attempt at sympathy is just embarrassing. As I'd expected, my section chief ripped me a new one for losing to the competition. One full hour, right in the middle of the floor, loud enough for everyone to hear. The chief will snap every once in a while, but he's a fair guy at heart, and it's rare for him to raise his voice that much. It was an unforgettable reminder of how serious my blunder had been. My whole body shook the way it had when I was a new hire, and if I hadn't been paying attention, I would have teared up. By the time he hit me with the final blow—*"It was my fault, too, for letting you handle this"*—and released me, all my coworkers except for Tanabe had gone home. It was probably their way of being kind. I seriously wanted to quit then and there, but I kept myself focused on the display on my own desk, gritted my teeth, and concentrated on making up presentation materials for another client. Even if I quit, I had no other prospects or dreams to chase.

At eight o'clock, a put-upon security guard shoos me out: "No overtime allowed today." The streets are awfully lively for the hour, maybe because of the Asian championship or whatever it was. Crowds spill out to the street from every bar, and businessmen who've taken off their ties and students wearing the blue uniforms of the Japan team are screaming and whacking their hands together in semblances of high fives. *God, just shut up.* I want to eat something, but I'd rather die than watch the soccer match, so after wandering the streets for a while, I go to a stand-up soba restaurant. It's a straitlaced chain place that always plays enka music, day and night. The only other customer is a solitary taxi driver—no blue uniforms. With some relief, I slurp a bowl of tempura-and-egg soba. Finally, my first meal of the day.

My phone vibrates. I remember the reply I haven't sent to Rika yet, but the text is from my brother. *I'm making dinner. Are you coming home?* What a conscientious kid.

I'll have some. Be home in under an hour, I reply briefly. Right now, I don't want to talk to my coworkers or my girlfriend or my mom or strangers, but at least my much-younger brother isn't so nerve-racking.

"I'm home. I bought some croquettes."

I set them down on the table, fresh from the convenience store. *I don't have to worry about work or Rika any more today*, I think, opening the fridge and taking out a can of beer.

"Thanks. Dinner's almost ready," my little brother, Takao, answers. He seems to be cutting up vegetables; he doesn't turn around.

"Thanks. Where's Mom?"

"Ran away," Takao says shortly. *Dammit. Again?* But with the thought comes a sense of relief. I open the pull tab.

"Lucky us. We can go halves on the croquettes." I take a swallow of beer and remove my necktie, saying exactly what I think.

"She said not to look for her in her letter. Are you sure she's gonna be okay?"

"Just leave her. You know she'll fight with her boyfriend and come back home."

Once he's living with her, not even Shimizu can last that long.

Takao has made chilled Chinese noodles for dinner. *Double noodles. Great*, I think, but I must have been hungrier than I thought. We polish off both the noodles and the croquettes in no time flat. One of the noodle toppings is bitter melon; the fresh, clean taste reminds me of the arrival of summer and is unexpectedly pleasant. This guy's still in his first year of high school, but sometimes he gets surprisingly creative; he takes after Mom there. I must've taken after Dad. I'm dull as a rock.

As Takao and I sit across the table from each other, drinking our after-dinner roasted barley tea, I tell him. "…I just settled on a place. I'll be moving out next month."

"By yourself?" he asks me.

"With my girlfriend."

Of course, we haven't settled on a place yet. I told Mom I'd be moving out by the end of summer, and now here I am saying "next month." Even I don't know why I'm lying to Takao.

Half past one, very late at night. I washed dishes for two, took a bath, went back to my room, thought about working some more, then decided against it. That was enough for today. I'll be at the company tomorrow and the day after that anyway. I'll be there next year, too, and the year after that, and ten years from now. I don't need to do any more today; it'll keep for tomorrow. When I get into my futon and lie down, I get another text. *Whoever you are, you need to leave me the hell alone*, I think. I'm frustrated, but I open it anyway.

Hi, Shou. I'm at work right now. It's started to rain a little outside. I guess the rainy season is almost here; it's a little depressing, isn't it? I'll text you again. Sleep well.

It's from Rika. An image rises in my mind: She's working in a female-staffed shot bar in the red-light district, wearing an outfit that reveals her curves and making drinks for soccer-hyped office workers. She works four shifts a week to cover her rent and theater group fees. I'm well aware that

she lives hand to mouth. In my mind's eye, I see her smiling under colorful lights, but I still can't think of a single letter of the reply I should text her. *Rika must be worried because I haven't texted her back. I really should send something. Anything*, I think, but the thought feels distant and disconnected. As I try to wring the words out of my brain, I start to hear the faint, hissing noise of a rasp. Our room is a traditional Japanese one, about a hundred forty square feet, with a sheet strung down the middle as a curtain. On the other side, Takao is still awake. Lately, my kid brother has been obsessed with making shoes by hand. The hobby is incomprehensible to me. Ordinarily, that sound would help me get to sleep, but today, it really grates on my ears. I can't get my thoughts together. Fragments of words cycle around and around in my head, carrying an unpleasant heat.

My little brother and his inexplicable devotion to shoemaking; Rika and her efforts to become an actress; my mother, who's playing for keeps with a middle-aged guy who's a full dozen years younger than she is.

What the hell is wrong with them? I think venomously. They keep running hell-for-leather toward a goal they have zero chance of reaching, as if no other place exists. All of them. For the second time today, my eyes are welling with tears. What a shitty day this has been.

I'm jealous.

But I could never say that aloud. Sniffling quietly enough that no one will hear me, I desperately try to sequester the feeling in my chest.

* * *

When I was a kid, I hated rainy days. It was probably because I couldn't use the athletic field or some reason like that. Ironically, that's the same reason I eventually started to like rain. It's like a conditioned reflex now; rainy mornings always put me at ease.

In the morning, Takao is standing in the kitchen in his uniform, packing box lunches. Lately, he's been making double portions. He's probably got a girlfriend, but still, it makes me want to tease him. After all, it's usually the girl who makes the lunches. Reaching in from behind him, I snatch a cherry tomato and pop it in my mouth. "Hey! Shouta!" he protests. *High schoolers in love. I bet that's a fresh, clean-cut romance.* The thought brings with it another pang of jealousy.

It's been close to three weeks since Mom ran away. Frankly, the place stays neater without her around, and the apartment feels roomier, more comfortable. *If Shimizu can keep her this long, he really is something. Maybe he'll take her off our hands for good*, I think, opening my umbrella and heading for the station. The throng of umbrellas are all flowing in the same direction, as if in a race.

I work through my lunch break, munching on an energy bar instead. Ever since I let that client get away, my sales results have stayed at the very bottom of the heap. I don't care where I stand in the rankings anymore, but I don't want to be a burden to the rest of the team, and I also want to start earning commissions to fund my move.

We haven’t talked about it in a while, so as far as Rika is concerned, the idea of moving in together is probably off the table entirely. I’m planning to keep quiet and move out anyway, though, even if I’m on my own. And I want to make sure my new place is big enough for two people. I don’t know myself whether I want to live with Rika, and if this keeps up, I get the feeling she’ll drift away from me. But all that aside, I just want to make enough money to keep up with the rent on an apartment for two. And all I can do right now to help make that happen is acquire more clients and propose appealing products. I’ve been working through every spare moment I have, and yet my results haven’t improved the tiniest bit. I remember this feeling from clubs back when I was in school—the more practice I put in, the more entrenched my slump gets. As I sip my iced latte—a gift from Tanabe when he came back from his lunch—I recall with some bitterness that my colleagues were particularly nice to me back then as well. Outside the window, the scenery blurs into the dark sky of the rainy season.

When my desktop clock hits six thirty, I call out to the rest of the office, “I’m taking off now. Good night!” and leave. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of the section chief’s surprise, but he doesn’t say anything to me. He knows I’ve been staying until it’s time for the last train lately, often alone. The rain is stronger than it was during the day, and it makes the city lights on the way to the station even gaudier than usual.

“It hasn’t been that long since I last saw you, Shou, but you’ve lost weight. A lot of weight.”

Looking up from the dessert menu, Rika sounds as if she’s given this a lot of thought before speaking. The slim gold bracelet I gave her a little earlier is gleaming on her wrist. Its small crescent moon looks just as good on her delicate arm as I thought it would—which may be why she feels farther away from me than ever. A beautiful moon, hopelessly out of reach. It occurs to me that maybe I should have gone with something else.

“What, really? Bet it’s because work’s been so crazy lately… I’m sorry I haven’t been able to talk to you very much.”

“Don’t worry about that! I’m the one who should be sorry; you’re already busy. You left work early, didn’t you? Was it okay?”

“Oh, yeah, it was fine,” I answer on reflex. The waiter has just come back to our table again, and I order dessert for two.

Today is Rika’s twenty-second birthday and, as it turns out, the first time we’ve gotten together since the French restaurant. Since it’s such a special occasion, I cut into my regular savings to buy a gift and make reservations at a restaurant with a bird’s-eye view of the lights of Nishi-Shinjuku. That alone burned through a month’s worth of my food budget. To be honest, before we met up, I would have said this birthday business was more of a nuisance than not, but seeing her again after all this time, I remember how dear she is to my heart, really. Rika is wearing an unusually formal dress, made of a deep-blue chiffon, with a black lace cardigan. Her makeup is

more pronounced than usual, and she looks mature beyond her years. How have I not realized until now how many guys she probably has chasing after her?

"I looked at a few apartments," she says, while I'm wincing at the sweetness of the chocolate dessert.

"What?" I ask. Between the distantly familiar song of the live jazz group and the babble of multilingual conversation around us, I wasn't able to hear her well.

"Last week. Apartments. I looked at a few of them." Rika leans forward, repeating herself a little more loudly. "I have photos. Wanna take a look?

"This one's in Myougadani, built forty years ago. These older buildings give you more space, and see, the hall divides the rooms, so I thought it might be a good place for two people." As Rika explains, she shows me photos on her smartphone, one after another. I give noncommittal responses, surprised that the idea of moving in together is still on the table. It's a strange mixture of bewilderment and delight to learn I haven't been abandoned. "The sashes at this one didn't fit well. It might get chilly in winter, too, but…I dunno, it just felt so nostalgic." I notice that this particular photo is of Rika standing in an empty living room.

"…You went to see them with somebody else?"

"Oh, yes. I asked someone from my theater troupe who's done this moving thing quite a few times."

Rika answers as if it's nothing. The yellow glow of the candle and the pale light of her smartphone illuminate her face like something out of a movie against our darkened surroundings, and suddenly it's like I'm watching someone else live my life from somewhere far away. *Was it a guy? Is he really a senior member of your theater troupe?* I wonder as I watch Rika's slim fingers swiping through photos and zooming in. I visualize the director or whoever he is, some guy I've never seen, aiming a camera at Rika in a wide, unfurnished room. And then the man is wearing the face of the young manager at my client in Chiba, or my section chief, who has the full trust of our team. I know it's craven of me, but I'm helpless to stop it. Trying to curb the ache inside me, I swallow more wine.

On our way back from the restaurant, Rika can't stop talking at first. She talks about movies she's seen lately and her classes at university, and it's clear that she's noticed my silence and is choosing harmless topics for my sake. But after enough noncommittal responses from me, Rika gradually speaks less and less.

It's a cool night for June. We're walking huddled together under a single umbrella so the cold rain won't get our shoulders wet. It makes the silence all the more uncomfortable, and when we walk into one of the underground corridors to the station, it's a relief. I put a little distance between myself and Rika. When I glance over to the side, her slim shoulders look cold in her cardigan.

At the bottom of the stairs that lead to the Chuo Line platform, Rika softly says, “I guess this is where we part ways, then?”

It’s impossible to tell whether she’s saying good-bye or hoping for an invitation. *No, this is too much*, I think. *Today is her birthday, after all. I’m treating her terribly, no excuses.* I’m castigating myself. I know what I should say: *I’m sorry. If you don’t mind, let’s go drink a little more.* Ordinarily, the words would be simple. But no matter which bar I take her to now, I know it will just prolong the discomfort. I have no idea what I should do, so I speak without thinking.

“…Want to come to my place for a drink?”

“Huh?”

“My mom’s not home today. I have a brother who’s in high school, but he’s pretty chill.”

As I watch, the cheer blooms on Rika’s face.

“…Are you sure?”

“Yes. As long as you don’t mind.”

“Yes, yes-yes-yes, of course!” She nods several times enthusiastically. I’m startled, both by my own suggestion and by the intensity of Rika’s response.

“Don’t you think peanuts or something would be good to add?”

“Peanuts? Actually, yeah, it might go. People fry cashews, after all. Let’s try it!”

“In that case, Miss Rika, would you slice the leeks?”

“Sure. Hey, this garlic soy sauce is pretty good. Did you make this yourself, Takao?”

“Yeah, I always make it when I don’t want to waste the leftover garlic.”

“Ooooh, that’s incredible! *You’re* incredible!”

This is—What’s the word? …Surreal.

I take another sip of sweet potato shochu. In the cramped kitchen at my place, Rika is standing beside my little brother, wearing my mom’s apron over her dress, while they’re cooking together and having a blast.

While I was changing out of my suit in my room, Rika and Takao really warmed up to each other. They’re like siblings, chatting noisily together. Maybe it’s Rika’s candidness, or maybe it’s some side of Takao I never knew existed. It’s a sight I’ve never even imagined. Surreal.

“Shouta, Rika says you’ve been going out for two whole years? Why didn’t you ever bring her home?”

Takao’s tone is somewhat accusing as he sets small dishes out on the table. They’ve made a sort of stir-fry of little fish and leeks and peanuts. The grilled eggplant, celery-and-cucumber salad, and spicy stir-fried *konjac* are already on the table.

“Shut up already. You’re in high school; shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“Huh?! Nooo! Takao’s going to keep me company while I have my evening drink! Right, Takao?!”

“I’m not gonna drink, though,” Takao responds, laughing.

“What, you don’t drink at all?” Rika pouts, and Takao jokes back that he’s already over alcohol.

What’s with this guy? I think. *How is he so used to dealing with older women?* It’s probably Mom’s fault. Worrying about what this kid’s going to be like in a few years, I reach toward a small plate with my chopsticks.

I have complicated feelings about it, but all the snacks are delicious. And it’s that kind of “delicious” that settles in far deeper than any expensive dinner dissected by silver cutlery—although I quickly abandon that line of thought. *No way that’s true.*

“Wow, a theater troupe. Has my brother been to see you?”

“He only came that first time. Didn’t you, Shou?” Rika teases, her cheeks flushed from the shochu.

We’re sitting around the table, eating beer snacks and drinking. My conscientious little brother is sticking to cola and barley tea, but he certainly knows how to make snacks that pair exquisitely with liquor. Every time she tries a new one, Rika is vociferously impressed. It makes it too easy to keep drinking. We’re far more relaxed than we would be if we were at a bar. Even though it still doesn’t sit quite right with me, I’m forced to admit that this is fun.

“I bet Shou’s just not interested in me, that’s why.”

“That’s not true. I’m just… I’m…”

I hesitate. Rika’s gazing at my face steadily, expectantly. There’s no way I’m going to be able to explain it well, so I take a completely different tack.

“Y’know, I still remember the first time I went to see Rika like it was yesterday.”

“Huh? What, what? What did you think? I’m actually kinda scared.”

I’m the one who’s scared, I think through the haze of alcohol.

“You mean it was love at first sight?” Takao looks oddly serious.

“Nooooo, Takao, that can’t be it! That was a weird play; I bet it freaked him out.”

“…No. You’re right; it may have been love at first sight. Rika looked like she was from another world. I barely noticed the others.”

“Wow, Shou, you’re *really* drunk!” Rika shrieks, embarrassed; her face is even redder now.

“So love at first sight *is* real…” Takao nods sagely.

I really am drunk if I’m saying all that out loud. *Still, I am the one who’s scared*, I think again. I’m scared to go see a play again and learn just how exceptional Rika is. I’m scared to discover that her world is too far from mine. I may be drunk and sleepy, but I can still feel it. Rika and Takao’s cheerful voices sound so far away.

I’m on an athletic field in a drizzle, wearing a blue uniform and kicking a soccer ball. My feet seem to pull the ball to them, and I can move it any way I like. I feel as if it’s a part of my body, and I’m entranced by the sense of unity. I know exactly where the ball goes, what my future will look like. There’s no anxiety or doubt. Before long, Dad comes to pick me up, and the

reassuring difference in our heights shows me that I'm in middle school. As we walk back home, I duck under his umbrella and out, kicking the ball.

"I think it might have been my fault that my brother quit soccer…"

"Shou's never said anything about that…"

I can hear faraway voices—Takao and Rika. I'm too sleepy to open my eyes, but the voices keep growing clearer and clearer.

"I always thought he'd be a soccer player. I mean, he was in the soccer club from grade school on up; in high school, he went all the way to Inter-High, and he got a recommendation letter for soccer when he applied to university, too."

No. They're not far away. I can hear the voices right next to me. I finally realize that I fell asleep at the table as we were drinking.

"When my parents decided to split up, I was still in my first year of middle school. I still wonder if he chose to go to work instead so he could pay for my school and food and everything."

"Did Shou tell you that?"

"No, he doesn't talk about this stuff."

No. That wasn't it. It wasn't anything like that, I think, startled, feeling as if I might cry. I stopped voluntarily. *I gave up; it had nothing to do with you.* I say it over and over in my mind, my eyes still closed.

I always loved soccer. Up until middle school, I was better than anyone else at school. Even after that, I played for keeps, and I chose to go to university on a soccer recommendation because that seemed like more fun than taking the exam like everyone else. In university, most of my teammates were far past my level, and my enthusiasm for it gradually cooled. By the time I was a college sophomore, I'd made the calm and rational judgment that an ordinary job would work better for me than going pro. My parents' divorce had been a convenient excuse. *I have to help shore up our budget, and my kid brother's still in middle school, y'know?* I'd explained it to my college friends and teammates, again and again, but I was pretty sure I'd never said it to my family. If ever I had anything like a talent for soccer, it expired when I was in my midteens at the latest, I've realized. And I was far from the only one. Some kids are just really good with a ball, better than you'd expect. It has nothing to do with effort—maybe they were born with the right instincts, or maybe they just grew a little faster when they were small. But as they get older, and height and muscle average out, that special something generally fades into mediocrity. That's all it is.

"Shou doesn't usually tell people much about what he really feels. He is a sweet guy, though."

"He should be sweet to his girlfriend."

"Yes, he is. He's much more mature than I am. He doesn't really talk about his feelings, though, so I do get nervous sometimes. I know he brought up the whole 'moving in together' thing because he knows I'm

short on money. I'm sure I'm the only one of us who's in love. But…I guess that's why today made me really happy."

"Well, sure. It was love at first sight, after all."

I can hear the two of them laughing. It's embarrassing—I just feel pathetic. And it's taken me this long to realize that the real reason I want to move is that I want Rika to quit her night job. The dull, constant pain in my chest slowly dissolves until it's indistinguishable from the glow of the alcohol. *Quit talking about this; now I can't get up.* I know it's unfair.

While I'm praying that they'll leave the table soon, I fall back asleep.

* * *

I move out on a fine day in early August.

At the crack of dawn, I rent a small truck, then drive my stuff and Rika's to an old apartment facing the botanical garden in Bunkyo Ward. I was surprised at just how much of it was Rika's, but when I complained, Takao and Rika joined forces against me. *"This is totally normal for a woman!"* they said. I secretly regretted ever letting them meet.

But all that aside, we manage to transfer everything over before evening, thanks to Takao's help. Now we can take our time unpacking. It's already been nearly two months since the night we drank together.

"Thanks for all your help! You wanna come eat with us, Takao?"

"I'm sorry. I have to work today."

As I quickly unpack the most necessary toiletries from one of the boxes, I'm catching snatches of their conversation from the balcony.

"Aww. I'll be with him the whole time from now on, so at least for today…," Rika says, and I shout at them.

"I can hear you!"

They laugh, reminding me how close they've gotten. Damn them. I smile a bit wryly, realizing I'm just a little jealous. Wonder if this was what Mom felt like.

"Okay, see you later," Takao says, stepping into his shoes. "Have me over for dinner sometime. Let's cook together again."

"Sure. I'll text you. Byeeee!"

"Good-bye," Takao calls, ever the gentleman.

Any girl would be lucky to have him. And I mean it. We spent fifteen years sharing a room, and yet we don't really know each other. In fact, we may understand each other better now that we're living apart. I really will ask him over for dinner someday soon. He's probably got his eye on someone now, and I'll ask him about her. I'll clear up his misconceptions about me someday, too.

"What a cute kid," Rika says with genuine warmth; she's still beaming.

"Did you notice his shoes?"

"Huh?"

"He made those himself."

"What?! You're kidding!" Rika is floored, unsurprisingly.

“They’re just moccasins, and they’re not the most stylish, but still. Shoemaking has been his thing for the past year or so.”

“That’s so cool! I can’t wait to see where he goes with that, can you? Maybe he’ll make me a pair of shoes, too.” I laugh a little at Rika’s heartfelt enthusiasm.

“I dunno about that. Goals change in three days when you’re a kid, after all.”

It’s an opinion I hold even now. Takao might end up making shoes for a living; he might not. Rika might become a professional actress; she might not. One day, the winds may change and lead their hearts in different directions.

It’s fine either way, I think. Whether you’re in your teens or twenties or fifties or above, there’s no clear break between one period of your life and the next. Your dreams and goals may constantly change shape, but they’ll always be with you. I’ve quit soccer to slave away in sales, but there was no clear moment when the former became the latter.

“I’m not so sure. I get the feeling Takao’s something special.”

On the cluttered balcony, Rika’s gazing at the sky with a warm smile in her eyes. The summer sun is beginning its trip down to the horizon, and the sunlight traces an outline around her profile. I follow her gaze to the little white crescent moon, hanging in the sky like a distant window, and the emotion hits just as hard as that awestruck wonder I felt when I first saw her in the spotlight. *She’s still so far away.*

Me ni wa miete / te ni wa toraenu / tsuki no uchi no / katsura no gotoki / imo wo ika ni semu

(*Man'yoshu* volume 4:632)

Translation: Like the katsura tree / on the moon / which one can see / but not grasp, / what am I to do with that dear girl?

Context: A poem Prince Yuhara wrote to a young woman. It's a poem that compares her to the legendary katsura tree on the moon. A feeling of longing for a proud, beautiful girl whom he can only meet and can never truly have.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Start of the Rainy Season, Distant Peaks, a Sweet Voice, the Secret of the World.
—Takao Akizuki

We might meet again, the woman said.

What did she mean by that? Was this meeting just an encounter, or more of a secret rendezvous? *Nah, that's not it.* It couldn't be. There was no hidden meaning. But this is probably the fiftieth time Takao Akizuki has tried reading into the things she's said. He's been wondering about these pointless questions for about two weeks now, ever since the official start of the Kanto area rainy season. And ever since that day, the sky has obediently continued the downpour.

"We might meet again, then. Just maybe. If it rains."

What's this "We might meet again" business? Was that "Just maybe" necessary in this context? Ugh, she's so frustrating.

The train pulls into Shinjuku Station, and Takao is roughly ejected onto the platform. The scent of rain wraps around him. Careful of the worn-down soles of his shoes, he jogs down the stairs to the ticket barrier.

Besides, she's already forgotten she said that. Now that we've seen each other a few times, I know what she's like. She's the type you find in the park drinking before noon.

He opens his vinyl umbrella, stepping out into the rain.

I should forget about it, too, then. She's a drunk lady in her…well, I don't know how old she is, but what she says doesn't mean anything.

Cutting across the congested Koshu-Kaido Avenue, he makes for his usual spot in the park. He shows his annual entry pass to the middle-aged woman at the turnstile and greets her with a "Good morning" and a smile. He's in his school uniform, but the way to avoid getting called out is to cover any sense of guilt with a bright smile.

Geez, how much water is gonna come down on us anyway?

As he walks to the Japanese garden, he tilts his face toward the leaden sky. He can see a vast ocean—the Pacific Ocean, or the Indian Ocean, or the Mediterranean Sea—bounded by a curved horizon. The winds carried all these thousands, millions of droplets here from those faraway places. A crow is flying toward the western sky, pelted by the rain. *Where is it going in weather like this, and why?* It looks oddly somber, and Takao worries he does, too. As he walks through the garden under his umbrella, he wants to seem a little lighter, less serious.

As he muses to himself, the arbor comes into view beyond the wet maple leaves. The woman is there, as she always is, and she's waving cheerfully. As she always is.

God, she's frustrating, Takao thinks again.

"Now that you're a regular, you're entitled to a freebie," she says abruptly.

When he glances up, she's holding a disposable coffee cup out to him.

"Huh?"

"Oh, um, here. Do you want it?" she says hastily. She's blushing over her own joke. *Just don't say it, then?*

"Oh, thank you. You're sure it's okay?"

"Uh-huh."

"Because I'm a regular?"

"Yep. At the arbor." She smiles with some relief as she answers, and Takao reaches out and takes the cup. The aroma of the coffee mingles with the scent of the rain, and he catches the faintest whiff of her perfume. For no reason, the inside of his chest aches, just a little. Still smiling, she lets her eyes return to her paperback, and Takao looks back down at his notebook.

She's like a snow-woman.

Takao sneaks a glance at her out of the corner of his eye. It's a thought he's had several times before. *Or maybe a rain-woman.* Her skin is so pale, she almost seems ill, and he suspects that it would be cold as rain under his fingertips. The color of her soft, bobbed hair is rather light, while her long eyelashes are as black as ink. Her delicate neck and shoulders seem dangerously fragile. Her voice has a sweet moisture in it, and it still sounds childlike. She's always wearing a business suit, which looks out of place in the park, and her shoes are always conventional heels. *Look, you're in a park on a rainy morning*, he mutters silently. He's skipping school, so he's got no room to talk, but she's really sketchy.

Most people would probably say she's objectively beautiful. Really beautiful. Takao isn't all that interested in the topic, but he's sure the word applies to her. Her beauty isn't very human, though. It feels more like a part of nature to Takao, like distant clouds or a tall peak, or a sight like a rabbit or deer on a snowy mountain. *Yeah, she's a rain-woman for sure.*

At first, her presence was an annoyance to him. He was skipping school because he wanted to be alone, and he had chosen rainy mornings and a park that charged admission because he was hoping no one would be there. But ever since their first encounter at the end of last month, she has always been there, in the arbor in the rain. This is the seventh or eighth time they've run into each other.

And yet Takao hasn't chosen another place to be delinquent, and even he doesn't understand why. It might be because she doesn't bother him, even when she's sitting only a few feet away. She almost never speaks. She reads her paperback and watches the rain, sipping beer or coffee, while Takao sketches leaves or thinks up shoe shapes or pauses to watch the rain, too, just as he's always done.

Except sometimes, she does speak to Takao, and none of it is ever something that actually needed to be said: *"The spot-billed duck just dived; did you see it?"* or *"These twigs have grown since last week, haven't they?"* or *"Oh, I can hear the Chuo Line."* They're simple statements, scenic

descriptions. At first, he didn't know whom she was talking to or how to respond, but he assumes she's making conversation after he realizes she's always looking at him. His responses are never anything more than brief agreements, so conversations with her aren't much different from listening to the rain.

"See you later," she tells Takao with a smile when he slings his bag over his shoulder and gets to his feet.

"Mm-hmm, later. Um, thank you very much for the coffee."

After that, Takao walks toward the Shinjuku gate in a lighter rain than before. As his pace gradually quickens, he realizes he feels exhilarated, the way he does after reading a story he likes. A single drop of her voice still lingers faintly in his ear. The sound of rain from a rain-woman. *But I like listening to the rain, I guess*, Takao thinks, and then, *God, she's frustrating.*

"Look who decided to show up at noon again."

When Takao walks in through the open classroom door, several of his classmates turn away from their lunches to look at him.

"What time do you think it is anyway?"

"You're gonna get in trouble one of these days."

He laughs and responds to his classmates' remarks, sits down in his chair, and unwraps his box lunch. Steak and peppers (his first-ever attempt) and rice with dried julienned daikon radish and powdered red shiso leaf. For the pepper steak, he experimented with a recipe he'd heard about at the restaurant. Apparently, the real deal used pork, not beef. *Oooh, the lighter flavor goes well with the peppers. I think I like it this way.* As he's chewing the meat and musing about his food, he realizes the guy at the desk next to his has his English textbook open.

"Hey, we've got classics for fifth period, right?"

"Nope. Old Takehara's out with a cold or something, so we switched to Nishiyama."

"Gah, seriously?"

He'd been planning on doing more sketching, but that wasn't gonna happen. Professor Takehara was nearing retirement, and his classics class was low pressure; as long as you were quiet, you could do anything in it. On the other hand, Nishiyama's English class was both boring and strict.

"You should probably raise your hand more so they see you're here, Akizuki," his neighbor says, without taking his eyes off his textbook.

"Ha-ha. Wish I could, but I suck at English."

Even as he answers, he abruptly thinks, Ha, Shao Hon would laugh at me for throwing in the towel.

* * *

It happened in April, when even the late-blooming cherry blossoms had mostly scattered, forming white smudges here and there on the asphalt. Ever since March, when he'd learned he'd gotten into high school, he'd been working part-time at a privately run Chinese restaurant in Higashi-Nakano, and the incident was about a month after that.

“Hey, kid, c’mere a second.” He’d had a bad feeling about the customer as soon as he waved him over.

“So…Akizuki, is it? You a student?”

The man was around thirty, his face red from drinking; he’d read the name off his nametag. Takao stiffened a little and answered, “Yes, I’m a student.”

The man huffed audibly, then pointed at his stir-fry with his chopsticks.

“This right here. There’s trash in it.”

Takao peered into the vegetables by the man’s hand, and sure enough, there was a transparent shred of plastic between a bean sprout and a leek. “Well?” the man asked, looking up at him.

“I’m so sorry about this, sir! We’ll make you another order right away.”

“Don’t bother, I already ate.”

He glanced at Takao and said nothing more. This was a test. His shoulders were solid and muscular. Instead of a suit, he was wearing an old polo shirt. It wasn’t clear what sort of work he did.

“Then…we can give you a discount?”

“Damn straight you will,” he snapped, and Takao flinched. “Show some initiative, wouldja? What’s the policy for stuff like this? Don’t you got a manual?”

Takao hadn’t expected that question, and he was starting to sweat. This had never happened before, and all he could offer was an incoherent attempt at an explanation.

“Um… I think what we’re supposed to do is, uh, exchange the order. With your permission, I mean. I’m supposed to call the manager and have him deal with—Um, explain things to you, but he’s out right now…so…”

Words failed him, and he could feel other customers’ eyes on him. The man heaved a big, dramatic sigh. “Then what are *you* gonna do?” He sounded irritated. “And I can’t read your mind, kid. Speak up.”

But the more Takao thought, the less he knew what to say. He scanned the restaurant for help, but none of the staff had noticed him. “Hey!” the man said again, more threateningly this time, and Takao hastily looked back at him.

“C’mon, Akizuki. People are gonna think I’m bullying you.”

“…I’m very sorry. Um, for now, let me get you a new meal—”

“I told you I don’t need one!”

“I’m sorry!” He bowed reflexively, hunching in on himself.

“Excuse me, sir,” someone said calmly, and Takao realized Xiao Feng was standing beside him. In a smooth motion, he knelt so that the man’s eye level was above his, and said, “My name is Li; I’m the floor manager. I believe our server has been very rude to you. Could you tell me what happened?”

He could feel the wind die in the man’s sails. *Oh, thank God.* His knees nearly gave out with relief, but at the same time, frustration bubbled up

inside him. He didn't know whether he was mad at the customer or the restaurant. *Why do I have to go through this?*

"You're new here, so of course you weren't sure what to do. Anyone would have trouble handling that. Make no mistake, though, the fault was yours, not his."

After they'd finished their shifts for that day, he and Xiao Feng were walking back to the JR station together, and Takao was surprised to hear what he had to say. He'd expected consolation—a comment acknowledging the harrowing experience, or a reminder that it was the customer's fault.

"But I'm not the one who made his food," Takao argued back.

The night wind was cold for April, and he was walking along glumly with his hands shoved into the pockets of his school trousers. The fast-moving clouds were tinted pale pink by the streetlamps.

"He was probably lying about the plastic in his food."

"Huh?"

"We only use colored plastic bags in our kitchen, specifically to avoid this problem."

"Then the whole thing was the customer's fault! Why did you give him a free coupon?" Takao bristled; this just didn't sit right with him.

Although Xiao Feng was eight years older than he was, Takao was only polite when they were in front of customers. The first time they'd met, the man had told him to keep it casual; plus, he remembered Xiao Feng's baleful confession that he'd quit Japanese language school after two months because the students had been forced to use polite speech. And yet his polite Japanese was still much better than Takao's, which instilled in Takao a sense of respect regardless.

"That's because we couldn't completely prove it wasn't our fault. Besides, it's foolish to argue with him in full view of other customers. People are motivated by what they feel, not what is right."

Takao didn't understand what he meant right away, and he looked up at the man who was walking beside him. He was tall and slender, and the lines of his face were so sharp, they could have been carved with a knife. Everything he said came out like a proverb, and his faint accent made his words oddly persuasive.

"You took an order from him while your back was turned. Remember? He asked for a beer when you were clearing away dishes, and you said 'Yes sir' without looking at him."

"Huh…?" He didn't remember that. "I might have, but we were super busy today," he hastily argued.

"It wasn't just once, it was twice. After that, you were talking to the lady next to him."

"Oh, that was because she spoke to me. She was just asking me questions, like how old I was and what days I worked there."

"And after that is when the customer called you over. He probably felt he was getting snubbed by an inconsiderate high school part-timer."

Startled, Takao looked at Xiao Feng again. He felt as if someone had slipped a sliver of ice down his back, and he could feel his face turning red.

Xiao Feng looked up at the pink clouds as he spoke.

“Everything has a cause. It’s all connected.”

Xiao Feng Li was a twenty-three-year-old from Shanghai. When Takao had first met him at work, he’d said his name in Mandarin, as “Xiao Feng,” but Takao just could not pronounce it. The Japanese reading of the characters would have been “Shuu Hou,” but Xiao Feng had not been a fan of that. Eventually, they’d settled on “Shao Hon.” He was the first foreigner Takao had had any real contact with.

He said he’d come to Japan because of his high school sweetheart. She’d come to Shanghai from Japan on a short-term language exchange program at sixteen, and then seventeen-year-old Xiao Feng had liked her the moment he saw her. She didn’t dress to impress, but even in jeans and a T-shirt, she looked somehow sophisticated. She kept her makeup light, but her shiny lip gloss was insanely sexy; she wasn’t especially opinionated, but the views she held were always rational. To Xiao Feng, she was an exception among the other Chinese girls, who were constantly vying for attention from the boys. She was a symbol of the unknown.

As a result of his enthusiastic advances, the two of them became lovers, and their relationship lasted for half a year until her time on exchange was over. Although she had fallen head over heels for Xiao Feng by then, he had very casually, very considerately, ended the relationship. During their six months together, he’d mastered very basic Japanese, which had significantly decreased the mystery he’d initially sensed in her. However, the experience had made him determined to go to a Japanese university on exchange. As if she was the first step, and he’d find something that was more precious to him waiting on the other side.

His father was in the import-export business, and with the Beijing Olympics just around the corner and the Shanghai World Expo two years after that, he wasn’t happy about his son studying abroad in Japan. (As he put it, “There’s no sense leaving home when you know it’s going to rain gold.”) But what young Xiao Feng needed wasn’t a guaranteed future, but a new unknown.

What Xiao Feng gained from his four years at university in Tokyo was nearly perfect Japanese, a variety of connections, and a romantic history with about a dozen Japanese women. He moved frequently, owing to financial and relationship circumstances, but whether his living companion was a roommate or a girlfriend, he always chose a Japanese national and consciously worked on honing his language skills. Meanwhile, he actively relied on the local Chinese community for part-time jobs, and he energetically worked at several of them—beginning in food service, then moving through imports, translation, selling Chinese-language teaching materials, and more—steadily building his network. By his third year of exchange, he was already confident that he could get any job he tried for. In

fact, he was earning enough from part-time work to cover his school and living expenses, and he had managed to completely achieve economic independence as a student in a foreign country.

His involvement with many Japanese women had given him opportunities to visit various areas of Japan. Some of the women he'd met in Tokyo had been from the snow country, while others had been from remote islands. He'd always been a friendly type, so he'd grab at opportunities to visit their hometowns and meet their parents, hear local stories and drink local liquor. As he did, Japan gradually lost its mystery for Xiao Feng.

Shanghai's World Expo had happened during his time on exchange, and he began wondering if the city in his home country was the new frontier for him now. And that was why, after graduating, he'd continued to help out an acquaintance in the import business instead of looking for an employer in Japan. He'd been issued a one-year visa when he graduated, and the looming expiration date made his hesitation stronger.

The job at the Chinese restaurant, which had just happened to be short-staffed, was a temporary stopgap until he decided on his next destination. Or perhaps he was repaying a debt. Xiao Feng still remembered the feelings from when he first arrived in Japan—frustration at the foreignness of things and a craving for the food of his homeland—and how this particular restaurant had helped him through them. Since he was fluent in Mandarin, English, and Japanese, both the restaurant and its customers found him extremely helpful. And when Takao, as a third-year in middle school, had lied and said he was in high school when he came to interview for a part-time job, Xiao Feng had been the one who went to bat for him with the manager. He'd argued that Takao would be starting high school for real next month anyway, and that if he wanted to work, they should put him to work.

Takao had learned about his life little by little, in the back of the restaurant when they were on break, or at the dim pubs Xiao Feng sometimes took him to on their way home. Spending time around this impressive Chinese guy sometimes made him feel as if his own life were part of some dramatic story.

"Akizuki, let's go get some tea!"

He's survived another English class, sixth period has finally ended, and just as Takao takes his next breath as a free man, Hiromi Satou enters the classroom. A few of his classmates send curious looks their way, wondering what an older student is doing here.

"Where's Matsumoto?" Takao asks.

"He has another hour of student council stuff. He says he'll meet up with us once it's over."

"If it's a date, go by yourselves, all right?"

"He wants you to come, Akizuki. I think it's easier for him to relax with three people there," she nonchalantly says, completely oblivious to the potentially problematic implications of her comment.

Come to think of it, he remembers Xiao Feng asking him for something similar, and he's suddenly very weary. *Why does this* always *happen…? If you like somebody, why don't you spend time alone with them?*

The image of a rainy arbor surfaces in his mind, and Takao hastily shakes his head. Misinterpreting the gesture, Satou tugs on the hem of his shirt and laughs. "Come on, come on, it's fine, let's just go!" Her bangs are trimmed straight across above her eyebrows, bouncing softly with every movement. The clean scent of antiperspirant reaches his nose, and he suddenly catches a hint of something like the rain-woman's perfume. As he's dragged out of the classroom, Takao thinks, *I don't really get this guy-and-girl stuff.*

He manages to survive for two-and-a-half hours on a ¥180 iced coffee, and when he leaves the chain café, he can feel the humidity on his skin. Today might be clear, but the rainy season isn't over. Looking up at the power lines gleaming in the slanting sunlight, he thinks, *The days have gotten longer.* And yet ever since the rainy season began, each day has gone by faster than the last.

He and Satou had spent an hour together at the café. When Matsumoto eventually turned up, the three of them had chatted for about half an hour, and then Satou had left for cram school. After that, he and Matsumoto had spent an hour sipping melted ice with their straws. After a while, though, he started getting a bit frustrated with the other two. *Talking about dumb stuff with these guys is fun, but geez, it looks like I'm dating both of them.*

Matsumoto had been in his class in middle school. Soon after beginning high school, he'd taken the plunge and started dating Hiromi Satou, who was in the next year up, but he still tended to avoid going on dates alone with her. And yet as soon as he was alone with Takao, he'd start grinning and talking about how much he loved older girls. Takao imagined that this mosaic of maturity and childishness was probably appealing to older women. *Feels like I've got a lot of older women around me lately. Satou from year two; Rika, the one my brother brought home the other day; Youko, Shao Hon's girlfriend. And then there's the rain-woman. I'm pretty sure Rika's twenty-two, and Youko's twenty-five. I wonder how old the rain-woman is, then. Is she older than they are, or younger?* As Takao gazes through the window of the Sobu Line train at the darkening sky, he can't even begin to guess.

* * *

At the end of June, the wisteria trellises in the Japanese garden have bloomed. They're a month later than usual, almost as if they've been waiting for something. In the abundant rain, the vivid purple seems to glow. The round, lustrous drops are unbearably sweet as they build and build in the flowers until they spill free in an unbroken stream. It's as if the wisteria flowers had hearts, brimming over with irrepressible joy.

I bet that's why I said what I did to the rain-woman. The wisteria got me carried away, Takao thinks afterward. There was probably one other thing

to blame: the list of registration requirements that had arrived the previous evening.

He'd ordered a pamphlet from a shoe trade school, just to see what it would take. As it turned out, the tuition and fees for two years were ¥2,120,000, and according to his rough calculations, he could save about ¥2 million just by working part-time through high school. *Huh? That's actually pretty doable*, and the thought had given him a perhaps unwarranted boldness. And Takao does have some regrets over sharing something so embarrassingly beyond his own capabilities, and yet he's still a little proud. *No, but that was what I really felt.*

"—A shoemaker?"

Even now, the exact sound of the question lingers in his ears. He examines her tone in retrospect; she sounded a little startled, but she didn't seem to be making fun of him. Her voice was young and sweet—without seeing her, you could easily mistake her for a middle schooler—but it always seemed vaguely tense. She sounded like a committee chair or the student council president or some other honor student type.

That morning, when they met in the usual arbor, the first thing the rain-woman had said was, "Hey, did you see the wisteria?!" She'd sounded unusually excited.

"Oh? Where is it?" Takao had asked in reply.

Under their umbrellas, they walked down to the wisteria trellis by the bank of the pond. When they stood side by side under the abundant clusters of blossoms, Takao realized that he was just a smidge taller. *Yesss.*

Drops fell from the blossoms one after another, etching beautiful rings on the pond. Like one person's feelings touching the heart of another, then spreading. The next thing he knew, he'd said, "I want to be a shoemaker" out loud.

"…I know it doesn't sound realistic. It's just that I like thinking up shapes for shoes and making them." Suddenly embarrassed, he added, "Of course I'm still not that great at it. I mean, obviously." No response. He heard her inhale, quietly, but that was all. Nervous, he looked up, and their eyes met so dramatically, he could almost hear a sound effect for emphasis. Without saying anything, she smiled.

And so Takao went on.

"If I can, I'd like to do it for a living."

He said the words as if he were talking to the wisteria blossoms. Like a declaration of feelings even he hadn't known about, the words echoed in his own heart, slowly filling his chest with heat.

If she'd said, Wow, that's amazing *or* Give it your best *or something like that, I would've felt awful*, Takao thinks. He might have blushed bright red, or lost his temper, or wished he'd never said anything at all. He was so glad the rain-woman wasn't that kind of person. For some reason, her muted reaction was incredibly encouraging to him. From that point on, Takao had

mentally stopped calling her “the rain-woman” and started referring to her as just “*her.*”

He’s not sure when it started…but at night, before he goes to sleep, Takao always prays for rain.

On the evening of the wisteria trellis day, Takao dreams about flying. It’s been a long time since his last flying dream. In this one, he’s a large-billed crow. Thick, hard, strong muscles cover the area from his chest to his fingertips; one stroke of his powerful wings pushes the atmosphere away like water, letting him fly free and weightless and as far as he wants. There are rows of thick cumulus clouds in the sky, and several rays of lemon-yellow sunlight lance through the gaps between them all the way down to the ground. Far below, he can see the familiar streets of Tokyo in detail, from the roof of his own building to the play equipment at the children’s park to a glimpse of a kitchenette in a mixed-use building, on and on forever.

He passes Kouenji, passes Nakano, glides between the skyscrapers of Nishi-Shinjuku, and before long, the usual Japanese garden comes into view. And the clouds open up. The water soaks the ground in no time, and the buildings and roads and trees glitter and shine in scattered rays of sun. Then Takao’s crow eyes spot two umbrellas: a vinyl umbrella walking along the thin path to the arbor from the Shinjuku gate and a madder-red umbrella heading for the same place from the Sendagaya gate. It’s the couple that shelters from the rain.

Then where should I go? He suddenly isn’t sure where he’s flying—until he is. *Oh, I know where.* He circles above the park and makes for the Yoyogi building. As he flies, he climbs higher and higher. The clouds are breaking up. *Oh, the rain’s stopping*, he thinks. *I’m waking up.*

The moment his eyes open, he’s praying for rain again.

“Takao, should I get you some more hot pot?”

“You need more water spinach, too. You’re young! I hope you’re not holding back for our sake.”

Xiao Feng’s and Youko’s voices urge him to eat in stereo, and Takao wonders, as he crams more crab into his nearly full stomach, why people think that being young means you have an unlimited capacity for food. *But I guess that’s typical for Shao Hon, huh?* Takao addresses the piled remnants of crab shells in a silent whisper.

Everything Xiao Feng has made is delicious. All the dishes are Chinese, but the kind that don’t make it onto restaurant menus. Takao doesn’t even know the names of most of them. However, all of it—the crabmeat that melts sweetly in his mouth, the spicy hot pot with shrimp and dumplings, the stir-fry of thick-fleshed gourd and Spam, and even the simple dish of boiled bitter melon slices—has startlingly fresh, complex flavors. Xiao Feng must have gone to a lot of trouble to gather all the ingredients. Takao really doesn’t understand why he’s been invited to something like this.

“You’re almost like our little brother, Takao. You have an older brother, right?” Youko asks. Her daring sleeveless dress exposes her white shoulders, and Takao is a bit distracted.

“Yes, I do. We’re eleven years apart.”

“Then he’s twenty-six? What’s he like?”

“He works in sales for a cell phone company. He likes having money and showing off.”

Youko is slurping up crab miso, her lips pursed, and Takao glances at her as he speaks. *Youko’s kinda sexy*, he thinks. The way she eats is skillful and a little erotic. Half of her thigh shows through the lace material of her lemon-colored dress. Her bangs have been swept to one side, and they hide half of her right cheek. Takao can’t take his eyes off the motion of her red lips. Her gorgeous sophistication reminds him a little of Rika. She’s very different from *her*.

“What’s with all the questions, Youko? You want him to introduce you?” Drinking Shaoxing wine, Xiao Feng banters with her as if he were talking to his little sister.

“You know, maybe I will. The age difference is perfect, and I’d love to have Takao as my little brother.”

“No, no, my brother’s got a girlfriend, technically.” Takao hastily intervenes and immediately thinks better of it—*Wait, why am I the one who’s getting flustered?*—and he glares at Xiao Feng, trying to remind him that Youko is his girlfriend. Xiao Feng doesn’t notice. He just calmly takes another swig.

“Aww, that’s a shame. Oh no, I’ll have to drown my sorrows in Shaoxing,” Youko says with delight.

“Yeah, you want some?” Xiao Feng stands up and wobbles toward the kitchen to get a glass. *Oh, he’s drunk*, Takao finally realizes. *Sheesh. Grown-ups, huh?* he asks the crab shells again quietly.

A few days ago, Xiao Feng invited him to come eat with him and Youko. Takao said he didn’t want to get in the way of their romance, but Xiao Feng humbly insisted that he really wanted Takao there. Takao couldn’t refuse such an earnest request, and so one sunny Saturday afternoon, he went to Nakano-sakaue.

He’d expected a condo in that neighborhood to be in a shiny new high-rise, but it turned out to be in a five-story building probably more than thirty years old. Its apartments were spacious, though, with only two families per floor, and Xiao Feng’s place was even roomier than the rest, the only one on the fifth floor.

When he entered the plain, neat living room, Youko was already drinking a beer. It was a brand he’d never seen, but the label called it Snow. Xiao Feng was in the kitchen, cooking; he told them the food would be ready soon, so have a drink and wait a bit. Takao had only met Youko at the restaurant a few times. When he greeted her, she smiled at him with a hint of sadness, and for a moment, he thought, *Huh? Was she always like this?*

There were multiple lipstick-stained cigarette butts in the ashtray. Even so, when he drank the barley tea he'd been given and began nervously attempting conversation, Youko soon lit up into the cheerful woman he remembered.

After drinking four or five glasses of sugared Shaoxing, Youko gets up. "I need to go use the little girls' room," she says.

Xiao Feng's eyes follow her briefly. Then he turns back to Takao, raises the brown glass bottle, and asks for the zillionth time if he's sure he doesn't want to drink.

"I'll hold off until I'm eighteen." Takao laughs, repeating the excuse he gave the other times.

"Gotcha." Xiao Feng's smile seems just a bit lonely, and he looks unusually tired. Dribbling some liquor into his own glass, he murmurs softly: "The thing is, I want to go somewhere far away." His tone is very grave, as if this is the revelation of a secret, and Takao looks up. "I've always been trying to find a way to a different world. I still am."

Those words lightly brush against something soft inside Takao. He suspects this is the first time he's ever connected with this man's weakness. It's strangely moving. But before he can ask what Xiao Feng means, Takao hears the sound of Youko's returning footsteps, and his question remains unasked.

Before he knows it, the sun has begun to set, and the living room is enveloped in pale shadows. They've drunk and talked themselves out, and just as the listlessness of an exhausted itinerary is setting in, Xiao Feng's cell phone rings. Takao is somewhat relieved, and Youko sends Xiao Feng a wordless look.

Xiao Feng glances at the display, then stands up and starts toward the kitchen, picking up the call and speaking softly on the way.

"I'll come up later, so you two go to the roof. Bet it's nice up there right now." Covering the phone's mouthpiece with the palm of his hand, Xiao Feng tosses a small key to Takao.

"The roof. That's a good idea," Takao says to Youko, and the two of them leave the room with the sense that they've just been kicked out. They take the short stairway up to a locked door, and it opens to reveal a space about sixty-five feet deep, illuminated by the evening sun.

Xiao Feng is taking his time coming up after them. Ten minutes pass, then thirty. As the sun sets, it passes behind some clouds, emerges again below them, and finally sinks out of sight behind the distant ridgeline. With each change, the shadows in the street shift dramatically.

Youko is smoking a cigarette. As he watches her back with a bit of concern, Takao thinks that maybe this is why Xiao Feng called him: so that Youko wouldn't have to spend this time waiting by herself. But he can't find a single thing to talk about with her. *Well, it'll be okay*, he tells himself, lying down so he can feel the cool concrete on his back.

The roof really is a pleasant place, like a poolside area without the pool. There aren't many tall buildings around them, and the view is open on all sides. *Yeah*, he thinks, gazing up at the sky. *Sunsets on clear days during the rainy season always look like this.* The western sky is a transparent orange, the color of a slice of salmon with light shining through it. As the sun leaves it, the sky turns grape colored. Finally, as twilight ends, slowly, slowly, by imperceptible degrees, the grape darkens to midnight blue.

"The thing about Xiao Feng…"

Hearing Youko's voice behind him, Takao sits up. She's gazing at the eastern sky, with her back to him.

"It's written with the characters for 'evening' and 'mountain peak,' you know."

Getting up, he follows Youko's gaze, and realizes that she's looking at the skyscrapers of Nishi-Shinjuku. There's a cluster of brand-new anonymous office buildings, and some very familiar ultra-high-rise buildings over 650 feet tall peek over them and through the gaps between them. There's the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, the triangular roof of the Park Hyatt, the inorganic Sumitomo and Nomura Buildings, and the cocoon-like Mode Gakuen. The evening sun reflects orange off the very tips of the tall buildings, while the streets below sink into dusky blue.

"Those buildings are like mountain peaks, aren't they? From now on, whenever I see a skyscraper in the evening, I bet I'll remember those two characters, 'Xiao Feng.'"

It's impossible to read the emotion in Youko's voice, and he still can't see her face. Then she looks at him and gives a smile like a lost child.

"Hey, Takao, tell me about the girl you like."

He doesn't know why, but he feels it in the depths of his heart: *Right now, I have to tell her the truth.*

"…I'm not dating anyone. There is someone I think I like, though."

Youko's gentle smile deepens. The lace ripples in the wind, over thighs it doesn't really hide. "And?" As Youko prompts him to go on, her voice seems to have a melancholy about it.

"Lately, on rainy mornings, I skip class and eat lunch in the park with her. I pack a bigger box lunch than usual every morning for us."

"Hmm. What's she like?"

Takao thinks for a little. "She's really bad at eating things. The fillings in her sandwiches fall out. She's lousy at using chopsticks, I've seen her drool for a second when she put a pickled plum in her mouth, and she eats chocolate with her beer."

Youko narrows her eyes, as if she's looking at something bright. She's in the shadows, and peaks far beyond her sparkle and shine.

"That sounds really nice."

"…Maybe. I don't really know."

By the time Xiao Feng finally appears on the roof, both the grape color and the midnight blue of the sky have been replaced by the murky dark red

of the city lights reflecting off the clouds. Takao thanks him for the meal, leaves Youko, and goes home on his own. He felt as if there was something he should say to the two of them, but he doubted he'd be able to find the right words, so in the end, he didn't even try. *It'll be fine; I'll save it for next time*, he thinks as the cars whiz by along Yamate-dori on the way to the JR station. *I'll invite them both over to my place to thank them for today. I'm not as good at cooking as Shao Hon, but I'll get some sake and make them traditional Japanese food.*

However, as it turned out, that would be the last time he saw either Xiao Feng or Youko. A few days later, Xiao Feng returned to China. Takao first learned about it when he got the text from Shanghai. *I'm sure we'll meet again someday*, it said. Takao hadn't asked for Youko's contact information, and with Xiao Feng gone, there was nothing to link the two of them.

* * *

When he remembers how he once believed he could grow up in three years of middle school, he's embarrassed. *How dumb was I anyway?* The world wasn't that simple, and people didn't learn to control themselves so easily… Assuming that self-control was a sign of adulthood at all.

But still. I want to grow up into somebody better, somebody stronger already.

Sitting in the arbor, thinking and listening to the rain, Takao is sketching a design for a shoe in his notebook. I want to be considerate to the people who are important to me, to be kind and strong, to be okay if I suddenly wind up on my own one day, to find an unshakable strength. I want to really live. As he draws lines with his pencil, he thinks to himself over and over.

Before long, he hears approaching footsteps on the wet earth. *It's her*, he thinks, and when he looks up, he can see her slim, suit-clad figure under her madder-red umbrella, through the maple leaves.

"Good morning. I thought maybe you weren't coming today," Takao says.

Her cool, beautiful face is the same as always. It irks him a little, makes him want to needle her.

"I'm surprised your company hasn't fired you."

She responds with a small smile, then folds her umbrella and enters the arbor. *Well, whatever*, Takao thinks, letting his eyes return to his notebook.

"Oh, wow. Is that a shoe design?"

Her voice behind him startles him; she's circled around him and is peering in at his notebook. *Waugh, what's with this lady?!*

"Hey!" Hastily, he closes the book.

"I can't look?" She cocks her head innocently.

"I don't actually show these to people!"

"Really?"

"Yes, really! Go on, go sit over there," he says, waving a hand to shoo her away.

She giggles. *She really is frustrating*, Takao thinks, even as his heart beats faster and his chest grows hot. A shrike or a titmouse or some other

little bird is twittering cheerfully on a nearby twig. Now that the woman is here, the rain is growing heavier. The endearing *splish-splash* against the garden pond is louder now.

"I'm going to eat breakfast," Takao says, taking his box lunch out of his bag. As usual, it's a larger box that holds full portions for two. He asks her the usual question: "Want to join me?"

"Thank you, but I brought my own today."

Takao wasn't expecting that. *Huh? She can cook?* "What, did you make that yourself?" It's more condescending than he intended.

"Oh, come on. I cook sometimes." As she pries open the pink lunch box with her pale fingers, she sounds a little miffed. The small container holds two awkward rice balls, soggy-looking lumps of meat that vaguely resemble fried chicken, a rolled omelet, and a separate plastic dish with a pinch each of pumpkin and macaroni salad. Takao decides it doesn't look very tasty, but as payback for looking at his notebook, he impulsively stretches out his chopsticks. "Okay then, let's trade sides!"

Without waiting for her response, he snatches the omelet from her lunchbox and pops it into his mouth.

"Huh?! Wait, I'm not really that—" When she's flustered, she really does sound like a child.

He chews the omelet, and grains of sugar cling to his tongue. This is a really sweet one.

"Hmm?"

Something hard crunches between his molars. *Eggshell? Oh, for the love of—* He promptly regrets his prank. This is even worse than he expected.

"—good at cooking…," the woman says, nearly inaudible. When he glances at her, she's rummaging in her bag, red faced. "Serves you right."

With that, she holds out a plastic bottle of tea to Takao. He takes it and washes down the lump in his mouth. *Ahh.* As he exhales, he starts laughing in spite of himself.

"You're clumsier than you look," he says. It's the very best compliment he can manage.

"Oh, stop it," she snaps moodily.

Ha-ha-ha. She's mad. I'll compliment her more.

"Still…it's good, in its own special way. Plenty of…texture."

"Now you're making fun of me!!"

"Ha-ha. Can I have another one?"

"No! Eat your own lunch!"

"Guess that's a no?"

"Obviously!"

Her face is getting redder and redder, and her frustration is getting more and more childlike.

This is the first time he's found anyone so endearing. *Yeah.* He can tell he's stumbled across something incredibly valuable.

It’s like that period just after the sun sinks behind the buildings, when the light from the train windows and the brightness in the sky are in perfect balance.

Or the moment when he spots a familiar-looking figure on the Chuo Line train running beside his, and then the Sobu Line comes from the other way to cut off the view.

Or when he’s walking through an empty shopping street, and he glances over to see a side street that goes on forever, perfectly straight, illuminated by streetlights.

His chest constricts, like someone’s squeezing it from the inside. Every time it happens, he wonders if there’s a name for that emotion. Each day holds countless moments like these. Was that true before he met her, too? *Was I like this before I knew people could suddenly disappear? What’ll happen if I stay this way?* No matter how much thought he gives it, Takao doesn’t know.

He only knows two very simple things.

The first is that he wants to make shoes for *her*.

And the second sounds ridiculous to him when he puts it into words—but he’s fallen in love with her.

Beyond the curtain of rain and maple leaves, the woman whose name he doesn’t know is smiling and waving at him. He feels as if he’s discovered a hidden secret of the world itself.

Waga yado no / tokijiki fuji no / mezurashiku / ima mo mite shika / imo ga emahi wo

(*Man'yoshu* volume 8:1627)

Translation: As rare as the wisteria / that bloomed out of season / in the garden of my house / I wish to gaze upon it still: / Your dear, smiling face

Context: One of the two poems Ootomo no Yakamochi sent to Sakanoue no Ooiratsume, along with out-of-season wisteria blossoms and bush clover leaves that had taken on autumn hues. The beauty of precious, out-of-season wisteria is compared to the face of a woman.

CHAPTER FIVE

Shining Madder Red, Garden of Light.
—Yukino

She’s finally made it. Dragging her heavy feet, she turns the knob of her front door.

Come on, Yukino thinks, disgusted with herself. *Why is coming back to my apartment enough to wear me out this much?* Pulling her high heels off her painfully swollen feet, she strips off her nylons in the entryway, then reaches around and unhooks her bra through her blouse. Setting the heavy book she’s just bought down on the table, she makes for her bed, doing her best not to look at the messy apartment. The things she needs to do keep surfacing in her mind, one after another.

It’s high time I picked up these empty cans and bottles. And I should get that melted chocolate off the floor and into the trash. And the laundry is everywhere; need to put that away. Need to clean off the oil on the stove. Need to water the plants; they’re nearly dried out. I have to at least take off my makeup.

Without doing a single one of these things, Yukino collapses onto the bed. A thick, liquid drowsiness crawls up over her, as if it’s been awaiting her arrival. Through the window screen, she hears the sound of a scooter going by. Somewhere in the distance, a child is crying. The wind carries the faint scent of dinner to her from some unknown house. She opens her bleary eyes, looking at the upside-down sky. The rain has stopped, and clear purple dusk spreads out before her. One or two stars are twinkling with inconsistent light.

Will it rain again tomorrow? Yukino wonders like a prayer.

When she closes her eyes, she can still hear the heavy rain drumming clumsily on the arbor roof.

Tap, tatap, tap, tap, splish, tap.

The irregular rhythm mingles with other noises: the distant calls of crows, the twittering of the ever-cheerful wild birds, and the faint hiss of the ground soaking up the rain. And today, they’re joined by the gentle sounds of sleep.

When the snores reached her ears, she looked up from her paperback and realized, *Oh. He’s sleeping.*

It was the boy in his school uniform, the one she only met at the park on rainy mornings, whose name she still didn’t know. He’d been drawing something in his notebook until just a minute before. *I wonder if he’s not getting enough sleep. Was he up late studying? Or making shoes?*

He was resting his head against a pillar, and his thin, boyish chest rose and fell in an even rhythm. She realized, for the first time, how long his lashes were. His youthful skin seemed to glow from the inside; his clean lips were slightly parted, and his defenseless ears were as smooth as a

newborn's. *He really is young, huh…* She was oddly happy that it was just the two of them in this small arbor in the Japanese garden; she could observe him openly as much as she wanted.

God, that was embarrassing. As she gazed absently at the boy's neck, Yukino was remembering the moment he'd eaten that failure of an omelet. She'd messed up breaking the eggs, and she'd thought she'd fished out all the fragments, but nope. That ugly, awful-tasting omelet had even had shell mixed into it, too.

Still, it had been fun. As she replayed the moment in her mind, she started to smile. Actually, it had been a lot of fun. She hadn't joked around like that in a very long while.

"Let's trade sides," he'd said.

"Serves you right," she'd said.

"You're clumsier than you look."

"Now you're making fun of me!!"

All of it sounded like cheesy lines from a school drama, but it had been really, really fun. *My toes are always cold, even in summer—but they weren't cold then.*

But Yukino had felt just as much guilt as enjoyment. I can't believe I'm spending time like this with a high schooler who's skipping class! Just because we're sheltering from the rain together, I'm starting to act like we're accomplices. I've deliberately avoided asking his name after all this time together, and yet I buy him coffee and let him offer me lunch and ask him about his dreams. I haven't told him anything about me; I've just been learning about him, little by little. I'm the last one who should be doing this —this is wrong for both of us. There's something wrong with me… But still.

Just a little longer. Just a little more.

She looked at the boy's face. He was still asleep. This wasn't just a nap; he was out like a light. *I'm surprised he can sleep so well in an arbor like this.* She was impressed, and also a tad jealous. Yukino knew from experience that sleeping required energy, too. You needed energy to ride the train, to remove your makeup, to taste your meals. *When I was his age, I think I had plenty of energy for those things. And yet now…*

Hey, kid…, Yukino thought, silently. What do you think of me? Tell me:

"Am I still okay?"

She asked the question aloud, so softly that her voice melted into the rain before it ever reached his ears.

"—And I can actually tell what those box lunches taste like," Yukino says.

"I guess that…taste disorder of yours is getting better, then," a man's voice responds from the receiver.

He says the words with a question mark: "taste disorder?" Although he sounds concerned for her, the skepticism he still feels about the name of that illness is clear even over the phone. She thinks, in passing, that she used to find it endearing.

When his call interrupted her doze on the bed, she dragged herself up, feeling more tired than before she went to sleep, and fished her phone out of her purse on the floor. The display showed her ex-boyfriend's name. For a moment, she couldn't decide whether to pick up or just ignore it, but then she remembered she'd been the one who'd called first. As she touched the ANSWER icon with her fingertip, she looked up and saw that the sky outside the window was now completely dark.

"No, really. Until just a little while ago, chocolate and alcohol really were the only things that tasted like anything."

Yukino is sitting with her knees drawn to her chest on the sofa—her lone, precious boat in a trash-littered pond.

"Right, right. Well, if you're getting better, then the decision to quit your job must have been the right one," says her ex.

Yukino manages to hold back a sigh. "…Maybe. If I was going to quit anyway, earlier might have been better. The end of the year might have been best."

"Mm, maybe so. But it's understandable. Leaving your job isn't an easy decision to make. Just don't push yourself. Treat it like a vacation and take it easy."

Oh, listen to him. Acting sooo kind, she thinks with some disillusionment, as she shifts her cell phone. He's so gentle, like I'm made of glass. Back when even breathing hurt, though, he never believed me. He only listened to the people around us. I think that was probably natural. I really do think he wasn't to blame. If anyone is, it's me. I was the one who invited all of that. Yet she lost all faith in him anyway. He's taught her that when a certain type of emotion is lost, it never comes back.

It happened during the winter of that year.

At first, Yukino thought she was coming down with a cold. She'd been getting the sense that food didn't have as much flavor lately, but she'd had all sorts of other things to worry about. She was sick and tired of everything and everyone she had to deal with every day, and her health was always off in one way or another. She had headaches and stomachaches and swollen legs and abdominal pain, daily work kept piling up despite her difficulties, and worst of all was the silent judgment from the people around her. Compared to that, the taste of her dinner seemed trivial.

But when the pasta Bolognese she had at a family restaurant on the way home from work tasted like nothing at all, she was so startled that she spit it back out on her plate. It was disgusting, as if she'd put something completely inedible in her mouth, and she hastily scrubbed at her tongue with her napkin and looked around.

It was past nine in the evening, and the family restaurant that faced Shinjuku-dori was about 60 percent full of businessmen on their way home from their offices, noisy groups of college-age students high on the joy of being alive, and couples flirting shamelessly considering they were in public. She watched them for a while, but nobody was making a fuss about

their food. In the seat next to hers, a thirtysomething man in a suit was eating a pepperoncino and fiddling with his cell phone. She stared at his lips. It wasn't clear how good he thought it was, but he was eating normally, at least.

Maybe something's wrong with my order?

She put her nose close to the Bolognese sauce. Its aroma wasn't that intense, but she did smell garlic and onions. Next, she put just one piece of pasta in her mouth and timidly chewed. It really didn't taste like anything, but she managed to choke it down, then drank water to rinse her mouth out. Abruptly, she realized that the man in the next seat over was looking at her dubiously. Yukino grabbed her pay slip and coat and escaped the restaurant as fast as possible.

Still confused, she went into a convenience store and gazed at the shelves of box lunches. *What should I do? Should I buy one as a test?* There were charcoal-grilled beef kalbi, a filling assortment of fried foods, a chef's selection rice omelet, premium beef curry. Any of them would do; she'd buy one, take it home, put it in the microwave, and heat it for two minutes at five hundred watts. In the meantime, she'd change into something comfortable, take her makeup off, hear the *ding*, strip the vinyl off the hot container, and open the plastic lid so the cloud of artificial-smelling steam could kiss her face. She'd scoop up rice with the white, weightless spoon they'd given her at the register, then put it in her mouth. The more she imagined it, the less appetite she had. What if it didn't taste like anything, either? What if she was forced to admit there was something wrong with her tongue?

Tak. The sharp footsteps behind her sounded like a message, and she hastily moved out of the way. An office worker about Yukino's own age stepped in front of her, as if she'd been watching for a chance. She was wearing a pale pink coat with fur trim, and she was significantly shorter than Yukino's five feet and four inches; Yukino's nose caught the sweet scent of perfume. The woman picked up each of the lunches, checking the calorie counts as if it were an instinct peculiar to her kind, and Yukino's eyes landed on the chocolate in the woman's shopping basket. Come to think of it, she hadn't had chocolate for quite a while. The sweet nostalgia mingled with the imagined bitter taste of cocoa on her tongue, reaching down to her in her distress.

That night was cold, and sleet fell along with the snow. Back in her apartment, Yukino's dinner consisted of two chocolate bars and a can of beer. Although it wasn't as intense as her memories, the chocolate she nervously put in her mouth was as sweet as it was supposed to be. The single beer she was in the habit of drinking at home around that time had the savor of alcohol. But except for sweets and alcohol, she'd lost all sense of taste.

After a full week of this, Yukino got scared and went to the hospital. They ran all sorts of tests, but the only thing they learned was that nothing

was wrong with her tongue itself. “It’s probably psychogenic,” said a doctor who looked as if he were still in college. “Work to eliminate stressors and eat well-balanced meals with plenty of zinc.”

She very nearly yelled back at him—*Hell, even I know to do that!* The things she could still taste became her lifeline—chocolate, cakes, sweet rolls, beer and wine—and her already-weak health got progressively worse. Even so, every morning, Yukino meticulously did her makeup—more for protection than for her appearance—and left the house. Even as more and more days passed when she was unable to ride the train, she always clung to the ritual of getting dressed. *I’m sure I’m not the only one*, Yukino desperately told herself. *I’m sure everybody’s living through some kind of hell that can’t be seen from the outside.* She lived through a winter and spring that were worse than anything she’d ever experienced.

And nearly half a year after the pasta Bolognese, when she met that boy during the rainy season, her sense of taste finally began to come back.

“—All right. We’ll take care of the resignation procedures after the end of summer vacation. I’ll tell the higher-ups for you.”

“Okay. I’m sorry to cause you trouble even though we aren’t even together anymore.” Yukino switches her cell phone to the opposite ear again. She hasn’t been to her workplace in more than two months now, but her supervisor is looking the other way and treating it as an absence due to illness. The private sector might have been stricter about this, but she’s taking advantage of her position as a government employee, and of her ex-boyfriend’s goodwill. She knows very well that she can’t do any more of this.

“I’m glad, really.”

“Huh?”

Glad? What about this is good? The unaccountable irritation she feels toward him abruptly rears its head, but he bears no ill will.

“That you met that old lady.”

She loses the thread of the conversation. Old lady?

“Huh? Who?”

“You know, from the park. The one who brings the box lunches? It’s a good change of pace for both of you, right?”

Behind his voice, she hears a car drive by. She knows intuitively that he’s at someone else’s house. If he’d been at his apartment on Kanpachi-dori, the noise of the car wouldn’t have interrupted that way. He’s eating dinner with some woman I don’t know. After they’re finished, he tells her he’s got a work call to make, and he steps out onto the balcony. As he talks to me, he taps out a cigarette, one-handed, and puts it between his lips. The images rise in her mind with vivid clarity, and she’s startled to find she’s still thinking about these things. No. He’s free to be with whoever he wants, wherever he wants. That’s not it. I forgot the lie I told him myself. I told him I’d started meeting an old lady at the park recently. We’d been talking to

each other more often, and lately she was sharing her lunches with me. And they're incredibly good.

"Okay. Take it easy and rest up."

With one last kind remark, he ends the call.

Slowly, Yukino's phone drops away from her ear.

It's already decided. But…

But I loved it so much. I'd wanted so badly to work in this field, and I put in all that effort, and…

Why?

The thought of *that boy* comes to mind.

"—I'm such a liar," Yukino murmurs, burying her face in her knees.

* * *

The day arrived with startling alacrity. Either that, or her growing suspicions over the past month that something like this would happen finally came to fruition.

That day became an unforgettable one for Yukino, encapsulating radiance and nobility and purity, and every beautiful possibility in existence. Its sweet, sorrowful, painful echoes would probably linger in her heart for the rest of her life.

Her alarm is ringing.

The moment she wakes, she's hoping for rain. As she opens her eyes, she slowly confirms that the sound she's hearing is real.

"It's raining," she murmurs to herself for encouragement.

Curiously, her headache and nausea and lethargy are all fading. She gets up from the bed and stays where she is for a while, listening to the rain. Her hair is frizzing with the humidity that's built up in the room.

At some point, Yukino has come to love everything about the rain. She knows why, but she never puts the reason into words in her mind. She knows she mustn't.

Pulling her bangs back with a headband, she pats on foundation, then applies a pale shade of lipstick. She puts on a freshly laundered off-white blouse, followed by a navy pantsuit and a thin belt, then a spritz of perfume on her wrists. She checks her reflection in the entryway mirror. *I wonder how old I look. Would I pass for my early twenties?* The next thing she knows, she's staring at the mirror, seriously mulling over the question.

"Don't be dumb," she murmurs, then grabs her umbrella and leaves the apartment.

As a part of the human tide carrying her toward the station, Yukino realizes with some relief that she won't be able to board the train today, either. And indeed she doesn't. She watches one Sobu Line train leave from the platform to prove she tried, then heads for the park and the arbor.

It's a July morning, shining full of promise to dispel the dark clouds around her. Even though it's raining, half the sky is virtually glowing blue. The low rain clouds are swept along in shreds by the wind, and she can see bright white clouds far above through the gaps. Washed clean by the rain,

the green of the garden is especially vivid. Light shines on the rain-wet ground; the moisture in the soil evaporates and turns to mist, and when the rain falls again, steam rises here and there like smoke signals.

"Here. It's a thank-you."

Yukino holds a paper bag out to the boy decisively. Inside is a foreign book, as thick as an illustrated reference manual, that she bought at the bookstore just yesterday. The raindrops tap away joyfully on the arbor roof.

"A thank-you?"

"I've just been eating your lunches all this time. You said you wanted this, didn't you?"

I wonder if that sounded like an excuse, she thinks, carefully watching the bewildered boy as he takes the book out of the bag. It's an instructive book about shoemaking, apparently a standard for beginners, and the words *Handmade SHOES* are stamped on its cover in foil. Yukino watches the boy's expression shift from confusion to surprise, then delight, like clouds in a windswept sky. Beautiful and white, never the same for more than a moment.

"—But this book is so expensive! Th-thanks!" he says in a rush, then hastily remembers his manners. "Thank you very much, ma'am!" *He's adorable. It's contagious; I just might start grinning, too.*

The boy opens the book right away. *I never realized your eyes could* actually *sparkle*, Yukino thinks, impressed by how literal the sight is. Even the rain that's falling behind the boy glitters in the sunlight.

She takes a sip from the cup of coffee that she bought at a café near the garden. It tastes as good as it should. With some relief, she lovingly meditates on the bitter aftertaste. *When I'm with him, coffee tastes like coffee. Rice tastes like rice, and the rain smells like rain, and the summer sunlight looks warm and bright.*

"—Um, I…," the boy hesitantly begins, his eyes still on the book. "I'm making a pair of shoes right now."

"That's terrific. For yourself?" *Oh, that makes me sound old.*

The boy doesn't seem to notice Yukino's worry. "I haven't decided who they're for, but…"

He falters.

Oh. She doesn't understand the reason, but she suddenly knows this is heading in the wrong direction.

"…they're women's shoes."

And just like that, the bubble bursts.

"I'm having a lot of trouble. So…"

At the same time, little by little, a warm emotion begins to seep out of the depths of her heart. As she tries to discern what sort of feeling it is, the boy goes on. "…So I need a reference. Since I can't use my own feet. So, um, if it isn't any trouble…would you let me see your feet, please?"

Even without looking at the boy's face, Yukino can tell he's about to burst into tears. *So am I, probably.*

A wagtail is singing in a clear voice.

All sorts of wild birds live in this garden. Yukino doesn't know the names of most of them, but she does know the wagtails. They appear in the *Kojiki*, and she remembers Ms. Hinako playing a tape recording of their song during a classics lesson. If she recalls—yes, it was the bird that taught the gods about carnal knowledge between men and women.

Some part of her mind is remembering things she really doesn't need to. *I'm so hot on the inside, but my skin is still cold.* Absently noting the strange disparity, Yukino slips off one of her pumps. Slowly, she extends her bare right foot to the boy. The two of them are sitting facing each other, with Yukino's right foot between them. Timidly, the boy touches the tip of her big toe. Her cold toes are startled by the feeling, like a hot sigh. Her heart is pounding. Both her pulse and her breaths are so out of control, she worries the boy may hear them. It's overwhelmingly embarrassing, and Yukino prays for her body to fall silent. *Let the rain fall harder. Let the wagtail sing more.*

Before long, the boy's hands gently cup her foot. He lifts it slightly, as though weighing it. Toes, arch, heel—his fingers move, examining her shape and softness. *I'm glad I exfoliated my heels the other day*, Yukino thinks with relief so heartfelt, she could cry.

The boy takes a small blue tape measure out of his bag. When he pulls the white tab out of the plastic disc, a vinyl tape follows it with a series of soft clicks. The idea that he keeps a thing like this in his bag leaves a surprisingly deep impression on her.

Gently, he wraps the measuring tape around her foot as if it's a bandage, then writes some numbers down in his notebook with a pencil. From the tips of her toes to her heel, from her heel to her ankle bones, the boy holds the tape up, measures, and writes. As he works, her pulse finally begins to calm down, and the rain falls harder to make up the difference. Meanwhile, the sunlight also grows brighter, and the wagtail sings louder, rejoicing in it. The *skritch* of the pencil across the paper joins with the sound of the rain. *This place, this garden—it seems like a whole different world.*

"Could you stand up for me?" the boy asks quietly, from beyond her foot. "I want to get a sketch of the shape of your foot when your weight is on it. And then we're done."

She wants to tell him yes, but her throat won't vibrate, and Yukino's response is nothing more than breath. She takes off her left shoe as well, then climbs up to stand on the bench, bracing a hand on one of the arbor's beams. The boy slips his notebook under Yukino's right foot, bends down, presses the top of her foot gently with his left hand, and carefully traces its outline with his pencil. Yukino watches him steadily. From far away, the sound of rustling leaves comes nearer, until the wind is rippling through the rain and the maple leaves and Yukino's hair all at once. Tiny droplets of rain scatter across her hot cheeks. *There's a light in you*, she thinks. *And that light may be able to put me back together in a whole new way.*

“I, um…” The words slip out, and the boy looks up at Yukino. “I can’t walk very well anymore. I’m not sure when.”

The boy is watching her, mystified. “…Is this about your job?”

“Hmm… It’s about a lot of things.”

The boy doesn’t reply. The wagtail sings to fill the silence, and then, just for a moment, the boy smiles. Or that’s what it looks like to Yukino. Still silently, his gaze returns to his hands. The sound of the pencil joins the rain again.

This is just like a garden of light, Yukino thinks, watching the glittering curtain around them.

What am I losing right now, and what am I about to gain? Is there anything to gain at all? Or am I about to hurt someone and lose even more of myself in the process?

Yukino remembers the thoughts she had as she walked toward the park exit, alone, under her umbrella that afternoon. When the morning was over, thick clouds had hidden both the blue sky and the sun, a return to the typical rainy-season weather. Cast-off cicada shells, wet with rain, clung unobtrusively to branches here and there. The time before their calls ushered in the true summer had been a brief pause of a season.

And that was exactly why that time was so perfect.

In the future, Yukino would quietly remember her time in that garden of light, over and over. When nothing had yet begun, when nothing had yet ended, and yet it was still something. All it held was potential, pure and good—a beautiful, perfect time that would never come again. *If the gods gave me the chance to live a day over, just one more time, I’m sure I’d choose that garden of light.*

Later on, Yukino would learn that her premonition had been accurate—that she’d hurt someone and lose something. *In a way—our time in that garden was the high point of my life.*

And yet even then, those perfect moments would continue to warm Yukino’s life with an strength that no one could ever destroy.

* * *

The cicadas are singing up a storm.

So many things surprised Yukino when she came to Tokyo, nine years ago, but one of them was the cicada calls. Cicadas sang in Ehime as well, of course, but they were just one of many natural noises, like birds and wind and rivers and waves. In Tokyo, though, they sang at a volume that was almost violent, as if thousands upon thousands of them had somehow managed to orchestrate it together. It overwhelmed all the other noises; even if the wagtail had sung, she wouldn’t have been able to hear it.

When they declare the end of the Kanto area rainy season, a few days later than normal, the rain stops just like that, as if someone in the know has flipped a switch. At nearly the same time, summer vacation begins for the students, so the boy stops coming to the arbor in the morning. She

remembers what he said on an earlier day: *“I decided I’d only skip on rainy mornings.”*

At the time, she thought he was a strangely diligent delinquent, a trait she found endearing. But now it feels as though he’s broken a promise. It feels unfair, as if her close friend has made another best friend for no reason at all. Yukino is aware these feelings aren’t justified, but she has nowhere else to go. Even on sunny mornings, she keeps visiting the arbor.

Today is yet another of those days; the sunlight is sweltering even in the morning. Because the general public is on summer vacation, she’s forgone her suit in favor of a white sleeveless blouse, an aqua cardigan, a green flared skirt, and wedge-heeled sandals.

The garden gets a surprising number of visitors on sunny mornings: foreigners with cameras, groups of senior citizens with sketchbooks, and elegant middle-aged lovers walking arm in arm. She’s sitting in the arbor alone with her paperback, hoping her aura says, *I’m not waiting for anybody. I’m just enjoying my book.*

She knows it’s too late, but she tries to reassure herself anyway. *Yes, it’s better this way. I’m glad he doesn’t have an excuse to skip high school anymore.* But despite her efforts, the knowledge that she doesn’t really mean it creeps up inside her. *The truth is, I—*

I didn’t want the rainy season to end.

As an experiment, she softly gives voice to the thought—and the inner corners of her eyes grow hot. *No no no, I’m never thinking that again.* She frantically returns her attention to her lap. *I am enjoying my book.* She tries to focus on the strings of letters.

The summer sun shone over a beautiful windswept plain that stretched as far as the eye could see. But for Nukata, the sunlight and gentle whispers of the wind were equally hollow. Her joy had vanished, replaced by an inescapable loneliness in the pit of her stomach.

Agh, no! Stop that, she almost says aloud. She’s had a copy of Yasushi Inoue’s *Lady Nukata no Ookimi* stuck on her bookshelf, and she’s picked it up for the first time in quite a while, for no particular reason. The story details the life of Nukata no Ookimi, a court poet and tragic heroine from the time of the *Man’yoshu* who was loved by two brothers, both emperors.

Yukino first read the story at fifteen. Back then, this was the scene she liked best, where the lonely heroine walks across the field of *murasaki* plants. After this, a famous poem would be born in the most dramatic of ways. As a student, she felt only excitement as she read it, but now certain parts of it strike deeper than she expected. It’s been like this for a while now, and she can’t concentrate on the book.

Suddenly hearing footsteps, Yukino smiles and looks up on reflex.

“This is such a big park!”

“Yeah, you’d never think we were in Shinjuku.”

A sporty-looking couple in their early twenties are walking toward her, holding hands. They're so chipper and companionable as they walk under the trees, even Yukino has to smile through her disappointment.

"Oh, excuse us!"

As Yukino gets up from the bench, making room for the two of them, the wholesome girl gives a quick nod.

"It's fine," Yukino responds, smiling back at her.

As she sits back down at the edge of the arbor and opens her paperback again, she hears the couple's animated conversation.

"This is the Japanese garden, so…where do you want to go next?"

"There's a greenhouse, right? Want to head over there?"

"Ooh, yeah, that sounds neat!"

"The map says it's kinda far, though. Can you walk that?"

"Oh, sure, that's nothing. I'll be fine."

Meanwhile, Yukino's eyes skim over the letters on the page.

On sunny days, it's like I don't know this place at all, she thinks. It's so lonely.

She spends her mornings in the arbor, and in the afternoons, she walks aimlessly through Shinjuku or Yoyogi or Harajuku or around the Outer Gardens. When her toes start hurting in her sandals, she goes into a chain café and rests until she's recovered, then begins walking again.

That's how she survives the long, long summer days, until the sun goes down. And all of August goes by.

As she pretends to read a paperback in the arbor, as she walks over hard asphalt, as she sips iced café lattes, she wonders, again and again, whether she has anyone. *Would anyone meet with me? Will someone suddenly get in touch with me, out of nowhere?* As she scrolls through the address book on her phone, Yukino thinks. *Yori called me a little while ago, but her child is still so small, and it's probably hard for her to get out. I heard Ms. Marui quit her job, but I'd feel bad asking a newlywed to go somewhere with me.* She is surprised by the number of names in her contacts list: classmates from high school who live in Tokyo, friends from university, friends of friends, boyfriends from school, boys she never actually dated but had meals with a few times, women she hit it off with during training sessions, work colleagues.

Hello! It's been a long time. This heat wave's been lasting awhile; are you doing all right? I'm writing because I got today and tomorrow off. If you happen to be free, would you like to go get some tea together? I'm sorry to contact you so suddenly. If you're busy, please don't worry about it.

She types out the text, with no name in the TO *line. Ugh, it's no use. I want to get together with somebody so bad, but I don't know who I should ask. Who would want to see me? Maybe I don't have anybody I can just… meet up with when I want. Anybody I could call a friend. She tries to convince herself that this is true for most adults, but she still feels hopeless.*

When the sun sets, Yukino buys the ingredients for dinner at the supermarket, mingling with the crowds returning from work, and drags herself on aching feet back to her apartment. Without even washing her face, she collapses onto the bed, waiting quietly for her fatigue to dissolve. When she's finally able to move, she slowly sits up, removes her makeup, changes clothes, and makes dinner in her messy kitchen. She usually sits hunched on the sofa, eating simple, one-bowl dishes that are easy on the stomach. Rice porridge or udon or chicken and egg over rice. They aren't all that good, but they taste like something, at least. *That's one of the things that boy left for me*, she thinks.

A breeze carries the scents of summer in through the screen windows and the spaces between her toes. Ever since that day, her feet have felt more special than any other part of her. She touches her big toe, gently. A sweet, sad pain seeps up from her toes to her lower back and out to the rest of her body. *This feeling is still here with me, too. There was something like a halo around him; in just a month, he brought about some enormous changes in me.* The idea comes as something of a shock to Yukino.

Have bars always been this gloomy and dark?

Feeling the bite of a salty dog on her tongue, she touches the mixed nuts, which remind her of the bones of some small animal. She gazes at the bottles arrayed on the shelf behind the counter and thinks back. She hasn't been to all that many bars, but she gets the feeling that all the others were brighter than this one. *Or does it only feel that way because I'm alone this time?*

Yukino has nothing against women who drink alone in bars, but until now, she's never gone into one by herself. She's never had the chance. Whenever she drank somewhere away from home, she was always with friends or a boyfriend or people from work.

Right now, she's sitting on a tall stool with her legs crossed, trying hard to hide her nervousness and pretend she's used to this. She started with something off the "Recommended" menu, a Hoegaarden White; she followed it with a white peach cocktail, and now she's almost finished her salty dog.

The bar has no windows to look out of; the lighting is too dim to let her read a book; she has no interest in the sports broadcast on the muted TV. She has nothing to do except drink.

After all the time it took her to even decide to come here, she can't leave after the length of a single class period. She tells herself this, reminds herself that she has to stay. She sips at the salty dog sparingly, as if she's been stranded and it's the very last of her precious water.

When she opened the refrigerator to get a beer before bed, there wasn't a single can in there. *What now?*

She thought for a little while, with the refrigerator door still open. She'd already showered. She couldn't go out in a T-shirt and shorts. *Still… Oh, all*

right, she thought, making a small resolution as she shut the door. She really did want that beer.

She changed into a pale-green dress, applied a little lip gloss, took a small rattan bag, and went out. She took her building's old elevator down, and once she reached spacious Gaien Nishi-dori and felt the quiet nighttime air, she realized how hard it was to breathe alone in that apartment. She wanted to go out and talk to someone, anyone; it didn't matter who or where. She would settle for a convenience store cashier.

There was very little car or foot traffic, and she saw the green light of a convenience store, small and alone some ways down the street. She slowly started toward it, listening to the measured taps of her sandals. When she happened to glance to the side, she saw a diffuse orange glow at the end of a straight and deserted alley. *A shop? A bar?* Yukino thought.

Nearly entranced, she turned into the alley. It was a bar. A small menu, illuminated by an orange lamp, sat beside the stairway of a mixed-use building. She hadn't been inside a bar in a long time. With some nostalgia, she remembered complex, sophisticated drinks and compared them to canned beer. *What should I do?* she thought, following the bar with her eyes as she passed by—until she changed her mind and turned back, but although she slowed down in front of the menu, her resolve was so weak that she nearly changed her mind again.

Just then, a woman walking a dog passed by, and the dubious look she gave Yukino was the last push she needed. Yukino went down the stairs beside the menu and opened the heavy door made of iron and wood.

"Are you alone, miss?"

A voice speaks to her very suddenly from the right, and Yukino jumps. She ordered another salty dog to fill her empty hands, and she's been counting the grains of salt on the rim of its glass, leaning in so close, her nose nearly touched it. She's just reached 129.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

The owner of the voice hastily apologizes at her dramatic reaction.

"Ah, no… Um, yes, I'm here by myself." Yukino's response is flustered as well. A moment later, her face grows hot. The man beside her smiles.

"Oh, good. I wasn't sure whether I should speak to you. I'm sorry to be so abrupt. I'm here on my own, too."

Yukino nods, but noncommittally; she still isn't quite sure what's going on. The man is sitting two empty seats away from her, although she doesn't know how long he's been there, and she observes him steadily. He's wearing a dark-colored shirt and a jacket that has a dull sheen to it. He isn't wearing a tie. His hair, which is long enough to hide his ears, is swept back, and the width of his shoulders is nicely proportioned. He's probably a little older than she is; he reminds her of a well-groomed foreign dog.

"Do you come here often?" the dog-man asks, raising his glass.

"No…not really."

“It’s a nice, quiet place, isn’t it? I work nearby, so I stop in sometimes on my way home.”

“…Like today?”

“Right.”

This probably only feels like he’s picking me up because I’m self-conscious , Yukino thinks as she makes tentative conversation. This is a bar, it is nighttime, and these conversations are probably normal. And I did leave the apartment because I wanted to talk to somebody.

“You work very late.”

“Yeah. It’s a publisher near here. You know, the building next to the convenience store on the corner of Yotsuya Yonchome? There’s a restaurant on the first floor, and… Well, you probably don’t know what I’m talking about.”

Yukino gives a noncommittal smile. She doesn’t know it.

“What about you?” he asks.

“Um, my company isn’t around here. I live in the neighborhood.”

“I figured.”

“Huh?”

“You’re dressed too casually to be coming from work.”

Dog-Man looks diffidently at Yukino’s clothes. Yukino feels as if he’s seen her messy apartment, and she suddenly grows embarrassed. Her face flushes again.

“That’s kinda nice,” Dog-Man says cheerfully, sounding more relaxed.

“Huh?”

“Just stepping out at night on a whim to go drinking by yourself. There aren’t too many women who can do that sort of thing naturally, y’know?”

He gives her a very pleasant smile that tickles Yukino with delight. It’s as if her homeroom teacher has praised her for a good deed nobody seemed to notice.

“I’m Saitou. And you?”

“Oh, I’m Yukino.”

“Yukino? Is that your family name or your first name?”

“I get that question a lot. It’s my family name,” she answers, laughing, then takes a sip of her salty dog as if she’s just remembered it. The salt grains are rough against her lips.

“So basically, she was out walking by herself when she ran into the guy she was cheating with, and then her husband showed up, too, and the other guy had to make a break for it? Damn, what a love triangle—and with two brothers, too. Talk about a mess.”

“Mm, I think it was less a mess than a quiet, complicated, emotional affair,” Yukino says with a wry smile.

Earlier, Dog-Man asked her what she did on her days off, and she told him she read books in the park. He asked her about the one she was reading now, which led to the conversation about *Lady Nukata no Ookimi*. Dog-Man hadn’t known that Nukata no Ookimi was a historical figure.

Instead of asking if he really works for a publisher, she recites a poem.

As I cross the murasaki field / shining madder red, / the forbidden land, / will its guard not see you / wave your sleeve at me?

"It was in your textbook at school, wasn't it?" she asks.

"Oh, yeah, I think I have heard that one. I thought that was a guy."

"No, it's a woman!" She leans forward for emphasis, and he laughs happily. "So after she's broken up with both Prince Ooama and Emperor Tenji, she walks through a field, feeling lonely. It's an imperial hunting field full of *murasaki* plants, spangled with white flowers. Ordinary people aren't even allowed to enter."

"Hmm." As he drinks his whiskey, Dog-Man nods with interest.

Yukino is drinking a cocktail to moisten her throat. *Wait*, she thinks suddenly, *what have I been drinking? How much?* For the first time in quite a while, she thinks she might be a little tipsy. Getting just a bit drunk and talking to somebody about the things she likes might actually be a lot of fun.

"The poem just slips out of her mouth as she crosses the field of *murasaki*, the imperial hunting field."

"Called it like she saw it, huh?"

"Well, yes, it was pretty literal." Yukino laughs, too. "That evening there's a grand banquet. They drink sake and feast, and each guest recites a poem from that day in the presence of Emperor Tenji. They're called on randomly, so everyone is nervous, wondering when it will be their turn. Except for her. If she tries, she can come up with any number of poems right then and there."

"She was a talented lady, wasn't she?"

"She was. Although I don't think it was quite the same as our modern conception of 'talent.' She may have been more like a shrine maiden, possessed by the spirit of an idea."

"You're a bit like a shrine maiden, too, Yukino. Next you'll tell me you come from a shrine family."

"Goodness, no! We're ordinary office workers. Anyway, the pillow word 'shining madder red' just drifts into her mind. 'As I cross the murasaki field / shining madder red, / the forbidden land.' So she already has the whole first section of the poem."

"Hmm… Hey, have you had any experiences like that, Yukino?"

"Huh?"

"You know. Messes."

Oh, he means the talk about cheating, Yukino slowly realizes. He's probably bored of all this talk about poetry, she thinks somewhat apologetically.

"No, I haven't really… None at all, actually. Nothing like that. Um…"

She tries to say Dog-Man's name. What was it? Satou, or Katou, or Watanabe…?

"What about you, sir?" she asks, covering for herself.

Dog-Man laughs. "Aww, you forgot my name, didn't you, Yukino?"

“Uh, no, I… Sorry.”

“Ha-ha! Don’t worry about it. It’s a common name, so everybody forgets. They ask if it was Satou or Katou or something. It’s Saitou.” His smile as he takes another sip of whiskey is a relief. “Well, this is pretty fun,” the man says.

“What, really?”

“Yeah. It’s been a while since I’ve enjoyed anything like this. What about you, Yukino?”

“Yes, me too.”

As she responds, she drains the remainder of her cocktail; she isn’t even sure what kind it is. “Bartender, get her some sort of frozen cocktail,” she hears him say, and she listens to him with a sense of unreserved freedom, as if she’s in a club room after class.

They decide to change venues and drink a little more, and since there aren’t many places in that area, they get into a taxi. As she watches the lights of Aoyama-dori stream by outside the window, Yukino thinks through an alcohol-infused haze, *So this is how relationships start.* They didn’t meet at school or at work, and no one introduced them to each other; the independent adults of the world act alone and meet people naturally. They expand their own worlds in an organic way. Yukino feels as if she’s discovered this law of nature through experience. It’s as if she’s finally become an adult.

Just after they pass the shuttered Shibuya Station, they get out of the taxi and walk side by side for a while. The damp summer air feels pleasant on her liquor-flushed skin. The back of her right hand bumps against Dog-Man’s arm a few times. She feels as if she’s walked through Shibuya at night with someone like this before, a long time ago.

Suddenly, he takes her hand. She suspected he would, so she isn’t too flustered, but when they stop, she’s a little surprised to see that they’ve entered the street of hotels in Dougenzaka. The healthy comfort of sleeping with someone flickers across her heart. “Would you like to rest for a little while?” Dog-Man says, like something out of a drama or a manga. She giggles at the thought, and he takes it as an answer. Dog-Man puts an arm around Yukino’s shoulders, gently steering her toward the entrance to a hotel.

Yukino begins walking, accepting the pressure. The automatic frosted glass doors open, a cold air-conditioned breeze brushes her face, and Yukino looks down. For the first time, she notices Dog-Man’s shoes. They’re leather, patterned like lizard skin or snakeskin, with pointed toes and a slick, glossy finish. And the memory of that boy’s shoes bursts into her mind with such vivid clarity that the fog of the alcohol evaporates. She can see the boy’s ragged moccasins come into focus. They weren’t school loafers or sneakers or dress shoes. She abruptly realizes that he made those shoes himself, and she freezes.

“…What’s the matter?” Dog-Man asks.

What's the matter? What on earth is the matter with me?

"Um… I'm sorry, I—"

Dog-Man watches Yukino steadily, silently. The unmanned lobby is deathly silent. As she detects a hint of exasperation from him, she hears a big sigh.

"…I'm really, really-really sorry!"

With that, Yukino runs out of the hotel. She runs down the hill, gets into an empty taxi, and asks to go to Sendagaya. The moment the taxi begins to move, she realizes she's incredibly drunk. Her vision spins, and every time the car speeds up or slows down, she feels nausea well up inside her. When the taxi is on its way past Meiji Park, she can't take it any longer. "I'm sorry, stop, please open the door." She flies out of the taxi, sticks her face into the shrubbery, and throws up violently. Her hands and knees are muddy, and her whole body won't stop shaking. It's like she's broken. Gradually, every blink of the orange hazard lights starts to feel like an attack. *You're worthless, you're worthless, you're worthless, you're worthless*, they remind her.

Even after her stomach is empty, Yukino keeps throwing up with tears running down her face.

* * *

Her alarm is ringing.

Even before she opens her eyes, Yukino knows it won't rain today. Salvation would never come down to her so easily.

Ignoring her ferocious headache, she washes her face at the sink. She applies toner, then moisturizer, as if she's carefully sealing something away inside herself.

Sitting down on her boatlike sofa, she picks up her foundation compact. Her weak fingers drop the case. It bounces once, with a small *tak* against the floor. Automatically, she bends over, picks it up, and opens the compact. The powder cake is shattered. Yukino gazes at the fragments, steadily. *Oh, it broke*, she thinks, a little belatedly. It feels as though it's taking longer than usual for the light to move from her eyes to her brain. Without any warning, the inside of her nose twinges, and her eyes sting with tears. Yukino presses her fingers against her eyelids, as if she can push them back in. *I'm not sad at all, so why am I crying?* she wonders.

"Sure hope the weather's nice tomorrow."

Murmuring the words quietly, she kicks her left foot into the air, tossing her shoe. The pump rolls on the floor of the arbor, falling on its side at the edge of the tiles with a little *clunk*, like a small, expiring animal. *That means tomorrow will be cloudy. Hmm*, Yukino thinks, opening the pull tab on her can of beer and gulping down about a third of it without coming up for air.

As she drinks, she notices that thousands of cicadas are singing. Come to think of it, it's been a long time since she brought beer into this park, which charges admission and technically doesn't allow alcohol. A little while after

she met that boy, she started to bring disposable cups of coffee. *Well, that's fine. After all, everybody has their quirks.*

Alone, Yukino watches the park beneath the brilliant light of an August morning.

A garden of light, shining madder red—

"The words came to me. Had I wished to write a second half, I could instantly create as many different patterns as I liked—" Or so Nukata no Ookimi had said.

Naturally, that's completely impossible for me. I have no idea what's beyond the garden of light. I don't even know what was there, or what was possible. I can't see any of it.

At twenty-seven, I'm no wiser than I was at fifteen.

As the sunlight grows brighter and the shadows darker in the garden, Yukino feels as though she's failing a test.

Excerpt: Yasushi Inoue, *Lady Nukata no Ookimi* (Shincho Bunko)

Akane sasu / murasakino yuki / shimeno yuki / nomori ha mizu ya / kimi ga sode furu

(*Man'yoshu* volume 1:20)

Translation: As I cross the field of murasaki / shining madder red, / the forbidden land, / will its guard not see you / wave your sleeve at me?

Context: A poem written by Nukata no Ookimi on May 5 in 668 (Tenji year 7), when Emperor Tenji went hunting at Gamono in Omi. "You" refers to Emperor Tenji's younger brother, Prince Ooama, who answers in the following poem. *Murasaki* is a plant that blooms with white flowers in early summer; a purple dye can be made from its roots. It was grown at Gamouno. *Shimeno* is a different term for the *murasaki* field; it indicates a field with NO TRESPASSING markers set up. Waving one's sleeve was an expression of love.

CHAPTER SIX

A Cigarette on the Balcony, Her Back as She Boarded the Bus, If There's Something I Can Do Now...
—Souichirou Itou

“You know why I’ve called you here, don’t you?”

I’ve made Takao Akizuki stand next to me, and I’m sure my eyes are sharp as I watch him.

“Yes sir,” Akizuki answers briefly, with his eyes down like any well-behaved child. Once I’m sure he isn’t going to elaborate, I lower my voice and let a bit of my irritation seep in.

“‘Yes sir’ tells me nothing. Tell me what you think the reason is.”

“…I think it’s because I’ve been late a lot recently.”

“You what?”

“Huh?”

“You ‘think’?! How many times have you been late just this *month*?!” I shout, and the teacher in the seat across from mine jumps and looks over at us. Getting called to the staff room and bawled out is enough to make timid students tear up, but Akizuki is barely reacting. His almond-shaped eyes and short-cropped hair make him look intelligent, and his general reticence makes him come off as oddly mature. Nothing cute or vulnerable about him. I take it up a notch.

“Do you think high school doesn’t matter? This isn’t compulsory education; we don’t have to keep you here! Do you think you’ll get to move on to the next grade or graduate if you keep this up? …Well?!”

I wait, hoping he’ll try to talk back, but Akizuki just looks down and stays quiet. He doesn’t apologize; he doesn’t make excuses or lash out defensively. *He’s a pretty tough case*, I think, as I realize that something’s bothering me. I have the feeling I’m forgetting something about Akizuki. Something unpleasant. *What is it?* I can’t remember. I really want a cigarette.

Diiiing doooong diiiing doooong. The first bell signaling the end of the lunch recess filters in through the speaker, and everything feels so dull and apathetic.

“…Enough. Go. Keep doing what you’re doing, and I’ll call your mom.”

Akizuki doesn’t even look visibly relieved. He just bows once and leaves the staff room. I never did manage to remember what it was. Well, whatever. If I can’t remember, either it was my imagination or it wasn’t important.

“Mr. Itou, you can be so scary sometimes.”

As I pull together materials to take to the phys ed instructors’ room, the English teacher in the seat across from mine teases me.

“You could at least ask him why he’s been late.”

She’s older than me by more than a dozen years, and I steal a glance at the wrinkled corners of her kind eyes. She always looks at things from the

students' perspective and treats them like independent adults, which is most likely why she's so popular. *My role's not the same as yours, ma'am*, I grumble inwardly.

"Akizuki certainly has been noticeably tardy, but he hasn't been creating any other problems; he's a good boy. Besides, if I recall, his family is…"

"A single-parent household. But he's not the only one, and it's no excuse for being tardy. Besides, it doesn't matter why he's late. During the first year, the important thing to drum into them is the fact that rules are rules."

She looks as if she's about to say something, but before she can, I get up from my chair with an armful of documents.

"Excuse me, my next class is tennis."

"Oh, the rain stopped." The teacher looks out the window, then waves with a rueful smile. "Good luck. If you find time at some point, do eat lunch, please."

She's right; between getting the papers ready and lecturing Akizuki, I haven't had a chance to eat. *She really is a veteran*, I think, a little impressed. *She's got sharp eyes.*

Leaving the classroom, I walk down the hall quickly, fighting the urge to break into a run. In the five minutes left before my next class, I have to stop by the instructors' room, give these documents to the chief phys ed instructor, then get to the tennis court behind the pool. I'll be cutting it close. The hallway is flooded with students returning to their various classrooms, but when they see me, most of them flinch and get out of my way. The only ones who speak to me are what you'd call delinquent types.

"Hey, Mr. Itou, did you catch the soccer game yesterday?"

"No, I didn't. Hurry up and get to class!" I respond to one of my former students—a third-year boy who'll be joining the workforce right after graduation, I grumble to myself in my mind. *I wish I had time for at least one cig.*

After my fifth-period tennis class with first-year kids, sixth period is a track and field class for third-years. One of my coworkers, a female phys ed teacher, came down with something and took the day off, so I have to teach both the boys and the girls today. Letting the girls know what was going on ate up my ten-minute break, so I still haven't gotten my smoke.

Today, we're measuring the high jump. I set up two mats and bars side by side, one for guys and one for girls, then have members from each group take turns running and record their heights. The first-year boys in the previous group were like a troop of wild monkeys, but for the third-years, the novelty of gym class has worn off, and they're not invested in it at all. It's no surprise. These guys are going on to higher education, so for them especially, phys ed is basically just a break. Plus, whenever you put guys and girls together, they always get a little silly. In the lines of kids waiting their turns, several students are whispering together happily, although they're trying to stay as quiet as possible.

"You're kidding, you've never eaten pancakes?"

“No, but, like, what makes them different from hotcakes?”

“Do you wanna all go there today, then?”

“By the South Gate! You know, the one next to the convenience store?”

I hear snatches of conversations. A memory of that exhilaration peculiar to adolescence flickers through my mind, when each word from the opposite sex is as enticing as a mystery. These guys have been cramming for tests for the last five classes, starting early in the morning; this final gym class must feel like fun to them. With no warning whatsoever, I kick a bucket by my feet at them as hard as I can.

Claaaaaaaaang!

The bucket crashes into a field roller, sending a cacophonous clatter echoing over the grounds. The students stare at me, but I say nothing. Their expressions gradually shift from bewilderment to fear.

“No talking during class. Sugimura, Yoneda, Nakajima, Kikuji. Five laps,” I bark at them in a flat monotone.

The students are a mixed group of four that I picked randomly from among the students who were talking. They were far from the only ones, but in cases like this, punishments don’t need to be fair. They just need to work on the group.

“Get moving!”

They’re dragging their feet and glancing at each other, but when I yell, the four of them take off running like they’ve been shot. I start writing again, as if nothing happened. None of the students open their mouths again until class is over.

I finally get my smoke at almost exactly the same time that I remember what Akizuki’s deal was. After sixth period, I finally ate a late lunch while I consolidated the lifestyle surveys for the first-years; then I coached my basketball club for two hours, and after that I went back to the staff room and put together the action plan for the off-campus study coming up at the end of the month.

Now I can finally go home for the day. Exhausted and limp, I lean against the wall of the staff entrance, look around to make sure nobody’s there to see me, hunch over a bit, and put a cigarette between my teeth. And as the smoke is leaving my lungs like a sigh, I finally remember.

Oh, right. He’s the student who showed up in my dream yesterday.

As I look up at the thin moon slicing open the purple sky, I remember.

Right. And what an awful dream it was. There were three of us there in the student guidance office after class: me, Yukari’s mom, and one male student. I didn’t pick up on it while I was dreaming, but now I realize the student was Takao Akizuki.

Yukari was quitting her job at school, and I was desperately explaining the reason to Yukari’s mom, whom I’d never met, and Akizuki, who was probably a stand-in for the entire student body.

“But you and Yukari were actually dating each other, weren’t you?” her mother said.

“Were you lying to us the whole time?” asked Akizuki.

Dripping with sweat, I ground my head against the desk and desperately groped for words.

“I can’t apologize enough to you. But we were seeing each other seriously, and I do think the school is partially to blame for Yukari’s…um, illness.”

“Illness? Are you saying she’s sick?”

“You two were dating on the sly, weren’t you, Mr. Itou? Didn’t you love her? Isn’t it your job to take care of her?”

“Did you cast Yukari aside because she was ill?”

“Nobody’s going to believe what you say anymore, Mr. Itou.”

—Long story short, it was a nightmare.

Shaking my head, I shove my cigarette butt into my portable ashtray, then start off toward the faculty parking lot. As I begin to put on my full-face helmet, I remember that I’m going to be drinking today. I’ll have to leave my motorcycle at school.

I leave the school grounds and make for the subway station on foot. There aren’t any students still around, but the silent crowd of homebound commuters and the clinging, saturated air of the rainy-season humidity are extremely unpleasant companions.

Takao Akizuki is a fairly unremarkable student in the new homeroom class I’ve had since April. He’s an extremely ordinary fifteen-year-old, except for the fact that he’s been living with his mom since his parents’ divorce a few years back and his habit of being tardy in the mornings. His grades are a bit above average, he wears his uniform as it’s designed to be worn, and he doesn’t seem isolated from the rest of the class. If I remember right, he isn’t in any of the clubs.

A lot of students without an afterschool activity tend to be the problem children, but in Akizuki’s case, he’s just busy with part-time work thanks to his family situation. He’s cooperative even in phys ed, and, according to his other teachers, he sometimes sleeps in class instead of listening, but he never chats. He doesn’t leave much of an impact on you, really. Personally, he doesn’t strike me as a student I need to keep an eye on, and he hasn’t even really been tardy enough to get us bent out of shape. I only called him out today because I figured it would be wiser to give him a good strict warning sooner rather than later.

So given all that, I have no idea why the guy came up in a dream about Yukari. I don’t teach Yukari’s homeroom class, so she and Akizuki wouldn’t even know each other in the first place.

Around the time I transfer to the Sobu Line at Shinjuku Station, it starts raining again. The raindrops are scattered across the window glass, hanging on for dear life. Each drop of water holds the lights of the city inside it, and I realize something as they go out of focus. *Oh.* I can’t put my finger on why, exactly, but the two of them feel the same. Like oil dropped into water, neither of them blends with their surroundings.

You wouldn’t instantly pick them out of a crowd, necessarily. They have friends, and they laugh, and they don’t make waves. If you look closely, though, you can tell. When you see hundreds of kids every year, you learn to spot these types. Both Yukari and Akizuki secretly have something in their hearts that’s special to them, that they’d never hand over to somebody else. It may be something strangers would value, or it could be totally worthless. I can’t tell, and it doesn’t matter. But that divide between them and everything around them is undeniable and unbreachable.

That’s why I’m actually a little uncomfortable around Akizuki, I realize, as I reflect on the matter again. It’s also why I couldn’t resist Yukari.

Maybe it’s only natural that they’d show up in my dream together. As I pensively watch the rain, it feels as if my mood will stay dark forever.

“Geez, Souichirou, you look more evil every time I see you.”

We toast with canned beer, and that’s the first comment anyone has for me. I’m a little more wounded than angry, which catches even me off guard.

“You’re already big and intimidating, but that look in your eyes will send the kids running for the hills.”

I drink some beer, think about what to say, then say it.

“Geez, Natsumi, you get mouthier every time I see you.”

Neatly ignoring my brilliant retort, Natsumi eyes me over her beer can.

“Rough day at work, huh? Don’t take high schoolers too seriously; you can just make a comment and they’ll get ticked off.”

I’m not sure how to respond when somebody’s so openly worrying for me, so I offer an evasive reply and pop a piece of fried chicken into my mouth.

Natsumi’s long black hair hangs down to her chest, and she holds it in place with one hand as she leans over the table and scoops some jellyfish salad out of its plastic container and onto a plate. Her bust gently forms a curve in her white summer sweater; I keep catching glimpses of it, and I glance up at the ceiling to avoid the awkwardness. Then I take a look around Natsumi’s apartment under the guise of rolling my neck.

It’s my first time visiting, but both the layout and the vibe are a lot like my memories of her old place. Her living room is about seventy square feet and bursting with stuff, but it doesn’t feel cluttered. It’s an apartment where the mess just makes the place feel more comfortable, which is par for the course with Natsumi. The walls are lined with those pasteboard storage cupboards with open fronts, and she’s stuffed them with a jumble of paperbacks and big hardcovers and CDs and makeup and hats and musical instruments. I recognize about a third of the stuff, and have no clue about the rest of it. Some of it clearly isn’t hers; I can see video games in there, for example, and young men’s magazines, and a shochu bottle. *I guess her life’s been pretty full*, I think with a hint of jealousy. A lot can happen in seven years. My next swallow of beer is a little more bitter than the last one.

I met Natsumi during my previous job at a real estate company, and we dated for about two years.

I was working to become a phys ed teacher, and the real estate company was supposed to be a temporary gig until I passed the exam to become a teacher in Tokyo. The workload in condo sales was way too heavy, at least for me; I think the only reason I managed to pull through without mental or physical health issues is that I had that goal of becoming a teacher.

During those years, condos weren't selling at all. Every single day, our supervisor would lay into us ("Nobody eats for free here. If you can't move the properties, buy 'em yourselves, you incompetents!") or coworkers would quit, their spirits or bodies broken.

And despite all of it, Natsumi was always smiling. We'd been hired during the same season, she had sales results that were just as lousy as mine, but she never stressed about it. And it wasn't a facade or a front; she was just enjoying her life. She was hard to figure out, but her joy was like an oasis in the desert of that savage workplace.

As we drank and groused about the company, we got closer, and before we knew it, before the topic of romantic feelings even came up, we were dating. We both liked getting out, so on our days off, we'd go on road trips or camping or we'd travel, blowing off all the steam from the shit we put up with on the weekdays. We were still in our twenties, and marriage and family and old age and illness were all far away; the lives we would eventually settle into were always just a little farther down the road, and that meant we were free of any responsibilities. Now that I think about it, those were happy times.

Three years later, I passed the teacher employment exam, and at almost the same time, Natsumi decided to go to Cuba on exchange (anywhere would have done, but apparently Cuba was the cheapest place), and so we decided to break up. No conflict; this was just how it had to be. The hopes we harbored for our new destinations far outweighed our loneliness.

About four months back, Natsumi got in touch with me for the first time in several years. I was thirty-two, teaching my eighth year of phys ed at my second high school, after being transferred.

Souichirou, how are you doing? It's been a while; let's go get a drink.

Her nonchalant request had come in from out of nowhere on a messaging app. At the time, I was dealing with some serious trouble that had spilled over into my private life. I took her up on her offer without a second thought, hoping I'd be able to forget about the whole mess for a little while.

When Natsumi and I met up in that pub in Nishi-Ogikubo, she'd hardly changed at all; her skin was a little darker than the last time I'd seen her, but her smile and easygoing nature were exactly the same. I'd assumed she had just returned from Cuba, but it turned out she'd been back for five years already and was working for a cell phone game company. Melancholy seemed to be a completely foreign concept to her, and I genuinely had fun

drinking with her. It certainly didn't rekindle our romance, but ever since then, we've been comfortable drinking pals who meet once a month or so.

Today, we met at our usual pub for the first time in three weeks, but the place happened to be too full for us. Natsumi lived in the neighborhood, and so we decided to go to her apartment and drink instead. We stopped by a sake shop and a deli for groceries, and now, for the first time in several years, I'm at Natsumi's place.

I don't notice the missed call from Yukari until we've gone through the snacks and cans of beer from the store and switched over to Natsumi's bottle of red wine. I casually open my cell phone, and there it is, from two hours ago.

Now that I think about it, I remember telling her I'd call her about a week ago. Work got busy on me, and I forgot. On weekdays, I have a whole lot of administrative work on top of regular classes in the form of allocating school duties, and my weekends are almost entirely taken up by club activities and sports meets and similar events. I'm actually a lot busier now than I was during my time in real estate sales.

"What's this, hmm? Your girlfriend?"

Natsumi points at me and smirks, her face flushed with liquor. I'm still almost sober. I couldn't get drunk on beer if I tried, no matter how many cans I had.

"No. I told you before; we broke up before the new term."

"Hmm," she says with disinterest. Then she stands up, yawning. "…I think it's about time for some coffee. Souichirou, if you want to smoke, go out on the balcony."

So Natsumi's place has finally gone nonsmoking, too, huh? After I watch her head into the kitchen, I go out onto the balcony, feeling a little like I've been chased out. The space is small, a token attempt at a balcony, really, and the air conditioner's external unit takes up half the space. The damp concrete reminds me that the rain has stopped. *Falling, stopping… That must be a lot of work.* I light a cigarette and take a deep drag. When I happen to look to the side, I see a small potted plant and a pink pitcher sitting on top of the external unit.

Suddenly, I feel like I'm being unfaithful to both of them somehow, and I shake my head. *That's not true.* I've already broken up with Yukari, and Natsumi's just a good friend who keeps coming back. Besides, she's probably concerned about how her resignation is coming along. I'm calling not as her ex, but as a colleague. I select "Yukari Yukino" from the address book on my phone, then hit the CALL button.

Even now, I clearly remember the sight of her when she first came to work, two years ago.

"My name is Yukari Yukino, and I've been sent to teach Japanese. I'm still a novice; I taught in Kokubunji for three years, and this is my second school. I'd like to learn a lot from my older, wiser colleagues and to grow along with the students."

My first thought was, *She doesn't look real.* There was nothing unique about her medium-length black hair and navy suit, yet they couldn't have emphasized the beauty of her figure more. She had a face so petite that I could have covered it with one of my hands; pure white skin; and large, liquid eyes. Her shoulders, hips, and legs were all so slim, you couldn't help but notice her chest. Her voice, trembling with nerves, was as sweet as a middle schooler's.

She was… How do I put this delicately? Like a love doll. Even I thought that was a terrible association to make, and yet the more I saw of her, the stronger the thought grew. I'd seen them online or somewhere like that: beautiful vessels, stripped of their wills, nothing but the twisted ideal of men given physical shape. *This can't be good. The students are gonna have a field day with her. Either that, or the guys will fall for her.*

Still, my worries proved to be unfounded. Everybody liked Yukari, and she was a model teacher. She always did her very best with a smile, no matter what was going on, and although she definitely wasn't especially clever, her deep sincerity and modesty naturally charmed people.

Her classes were popular, too. The public high school curriculum had a tendency to just churn through the work assigned by the Ministry of Culture, but Yukari seemed to love her subject. She told her students about how the worlds of novels and the classics had saved her during adolescence, and her carefully planned classes were backed up by that experience and enthusiasm. Before long, she'd won the kids over. When classes got Yukari as their Japanese teacher, their average grades went up, without exception. She was popular with the male students, unsurprisingly, but from the leaked stories I heard, she seemed pretty well versed in ways of turning them down without hurting them too much.

It was simple: Yukari was much better suited to teaching than I was. Well, so much the better. Whenever I saw her among the students, I genuinely thought so. It was much better than a new teacher creating problems, directly or indirectly.

On the other hand, Yukari apparently hadn't thought much of me at all.

"I was just startled to see a teacher who looked like a gangster at my school," Yukari once jokingly told me, after we'd gotten closer.

All I could do was smile a little awkwardly. I knew she'd seen me bawling out students in the halls and on the sports fields multiple times. After all, I'd decided that whenever I yelled at students, I'd do it in front of a crowd.

It didn't hurt me one bit to learn that this young, beautiful, and obviously popular new teacher thought of me that way. In fact, I wanted no part of the acquisition race that had abruptly broken out among the single male faculty members over Yukari, so her distaste for me worked out in my favor.

We ended up getting closer in September, at the faculty party to celebrate finishing the cultural festival, the school trip, and the parent-student-teacher meetings. There were more than thirty of us there—all

completely drunk—in a big room at a cheap chain pub, and the banquet was in full swing. I was sipping bad sake at the foot of the table when, all of a sudden, I heard our vice-principal calling me over.

“Heeey, Mr. Itou, got a minute?”

I worked my way up between the backs of my coworkers and the wall. At the head of the table, the vice-principal was pleasantly drunk and all smiles, chatting with Yukari.

“See, we were talking about who on staff could hold their liquor the best. Now, I would’ve put my money on you, Mr. Itou, hands down, but Ms. Yukino here… She’s been drinking and drinking and she’s not even flushed!” he said cheerfully, watching her.

The vice-principal had loosened his tie beneath his double chin (which was a surprising feature, given how skinny he was). Yukari appeared to be looking to me for help.

“So we wanted to put the question to rest here and now, see who was the heaviest drinker at our school! Isn’t that right, Ms. Yukino?”

“No, um, that wasn’t what I… Look, I’m sure this will make trouble for Mr. Itou, too, and I should probably…”

Yukari was desperately trying to talk him down. I felt terrible for her; she was so flustered, she seemed ready to cry. When I looked around at the other staff members, they were all pretending they were too engrossed in their separate conversations to hear. I sighed a little. The vice-principal was a persistent boss, and drinking made him even more obstinate. He’d get drunk after only a little alcohol, but he could last for ages without passing out, and he loved to mess with the people around him. Unfamiliar with his habits, Yukari had failed to make her getaway in time. One of her neighbors really should have rescued her.

“All right,” I told the vice-principal. He gave a whoop. Most of our colleagues couldn’t stand this supervisor, but I didn’t feel that way. He could be calm and logical as a manager when he needed to be.

I turned to my bewildered-looking companion.

“What’s your favorite type of liquor, Ms. Yukino?”

“Huh…? I like Japanese sake, but, um…”

Without letting her argue, I pushed the button on the table and put in an order. “Let’s go with that, then. Excuse me. Bring us four *go* of chilled sake and two cups.”

A big, 750-milliliter sake decanter arrived. I poured about a quarter of it into each of the cups, then handed one to Yukari. At some point, the faculty around us had begun to look our way with a mixture of interest and worry. Ignoring Yukari’s obvious unease, I just said, “Okay, cheers,” and clinked my glass against hers.

Steeling herself, Yukari raised her glass to her lips. I shot her a glance, then knocked back the entire contents of my glass in one gulp. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the shock of my coworkers. I poured the same amount into my glass again, drained it again, then drank down the last

quarter. Before Yukari had emptied half her glass, I'd put away three *go* of sake.

Applause and cheers rose around us. The vice-principal was clapping wildly, apparently the most excited of the bunch. Yukari wasn't even sure what had happened, and our eyes met. Slowly, the tension melted from that delicate face of hers, and then she smiled gently.

It's like watching a flower bloom. As the alcohol reached into the core of my mind, I genuinely thought Yukari was beautiful for the first time.

"—All right. We'll take care of the resignation procedures after the end of summer vacation. I'll tell the higher-ups for you."

Out on the balcony, I reassure Yukari and end the call. Now that I've told her what I had to tell her, I'm just a little relieved.

I think it was probably around the third term, after the new year began. Gradually, Yukari started calling out from work more and more often. At first, she was sick once a week or so, but before long, she was out more than she was in. In the end, she made it to school about half the time during the third term, and she hadn't been in more than a handful of times since April. I think it's safe to say that under those circumstances, the school was being very generous in letting her submit her resignation herself instead of forcing her to resign.

I exhale the smoke on a long breath, letting my whole body relax. I look around the balcony but don't see an ashtray, so I grudgingly take my portable ashtray out of my pocket.

When I step back into the apartment, Natsumi is drinking coffee and watching TV. The blue cheese that accompanied our wine is drying out, and it somehow reminds me of an abandoned village. *I haven't been back home in quite a while*, I think, out of nowhere, as I sit down across from Natsumi. She doesn't even glance my way. Come to think of it, she does tend to focus so hard on things that she loses touch with everything around her. She's always been that way. I'm staring at the cheese, hesitating between drinking wine and drinking coffee, when—

"All right, see you later," Natsumi says abruptly. I can't read the emotion in her voice.

For a moment, I almost ask her what she said. "—Uh, oh, right… I haven't cleaned up the mess I made with the snacks…"

"It's fine. I'll text you later." Natsumi gives me a very small smile. Well, more of a subtle tilt at the corners of her lips. The smile is more in the eye of the beholder.

In other words, "Get lost already." That doesn't sit quite right with me, but I might have overstepped and stayed too long when we aren't even going out. Besides, it's probably better than accidentally having to stay here overnight and letting something happen.

So I thank Natsumi and leave her apartment. Since I left my motorcycle at school, I'll be in for a packed commute tomorrow morning, too. It's

frustrating, but I don't have an outlet for it now as I cram myself into the train.

I could marry her. I want to marry her. I want her to marry me. I want to marry her and make her mine forever. I'd never thought any of those things about anyone until I met Yukari.

Ever since that incident at the pub, we'd started talking at school, little by little. That said, we didn't want the students to see us chatting, and I did the majority of my desk work in the phys ed instructors' room. So the only times I could talk to her were brief moments in the morning or when we met in the staff room after school.

Once we'd gotten a bit closer, I became keenly aware of just how special a woman Yukari was. Just meeting her eyes was enough to make you forget everything else. It was a power not even she could control.

There are some natural sights that create a kind of irresistible awe, and she was the same. Being near her was all you needed. Who could avoid a typhoon that covers the sky or an earthquake that shakes the ground beneath their feet? That was the kind of woman Yukari was. I'd never met anyone like her.

She caught me, I thought, and I wasn't sure whether that made me happy or not. To be honest, I'd known she was an extraordinary woman the moment I first laid eyes on her. I hated being bound by something stronger than I was; the idea was terrifying to me, and I'm sure I'd been carefully avoiding her for that reason…but it was too late now.

Just exchanging a word or two with Yukari would create a warmth in my chest that would last until I fell asleep that night. On the days we didn't talk, everything around me looked duller than usual. It was like a hopeless middle-school first love. No—it was worse.

Before long, just seeing her at school wasn't enough, and I started inviting her to restaurants and movies on our days off. Yukari was a gentle, reserved woman. Her health seemed relatively delicate, and she sometimes had fevers or spells of anemia. To a guy like me, who didn't even catch a cold once a year, it was just one more mystery about her. She always seemed vaguely tense, and her voice had a little quiver. Every time I heard it, I was desperate to protect her, so desperate I could weep.

I put a helmet on her petite head, set her on the back of my bike, and took her to Okutama and Nikko and Hakone. She said she hadn't done much sightseeing since she came to Tokyo, and everywhere we went, she seemed to be enjoying herself. It was a smile so beautiful it hurt, like a needle that lanced straight into the softest place in the human heart, and there was no escaping it.

I'd found my ideal woman—it was something like a miracle. It felt as if by some astronomical coincidence, I'd been wandering through Tokyo and happened to spot a rare butterfly indigenous to a single remote island.

It wasn't long before I realized with some astonishment that just seeing Yukari talking to students during breaks made me jealous. The kids always

flocked to her anyway, but that was around the time one particular girl had virtually latched on to her. She was a first-year student named Shouko Aizawa, attractive and popular, and one of my homeroom students. She was a beauty, her grades were good, and she was a natural leader. Girls like her often become the stars of the school. Several of the guys in the basketball club had gotten shot down. The sight of Yukari and Aizawa walking side by side like sisters in the low light of the corridor—it was as beautiful and striking as film clipped from an old movie.

—Yup. Pathetic as it was, I was jealous of a sixteen-year-old girl. I had to make Yukari mine before somebody else took her. It sounds so stupid, but Shouko Aizawa gave me the push I needed. On Christmas night, Yukari and I went out for dinner, and while we were walking back to the station, I pulled her into a hug and said it out loud.

"I love you. And I want you to love me back."

To this day, I can still hear her tremulous "All right" in my ears.

I was unbelievably happy back then.

And now, I sometimes seriously worry that that voice may never leave my ears again.

* * *

Summer vacation ended, and the second term has begun.

It was the rainy season when Natsumi and I drank at her apartment, so it's been almost two months since then. I've spent my days in a constant struggle to stay on top of my work. It might have been summer vacation for the students, but that time is always business as usual for faculty members. In my case, the basketball club had practice and away games, so I was actually busier than usual. I contacted Natsumi a few times, but our schedules never matched up. We haven't seen each other since that day.

Come to think of it, it's been even longer since Yukari and I met face-to-face like this. When was the last time…? Probably in April, on the last day she managed to come to work. Now, with Yukari standing right in front of me in the staff room, her color seems a bit better than it's been for a while. Even though it's summer, she's wearing dark-navy slacks and a long-sleeved charcoal-gray jacket over a white blouse. I'm in a tracksuit, and somehow I feel even seedier than usual. It's true; no matter what's going on, Yukari always dresses impeccably, and no matter what she's wearing, she wears it better than any magazine model. There's no emotion in her eyes—but Yukari is transparently beautiful in a way that would make even the hardest heart tremble.

"All right. Let's get going," I prompt her.

"Yes, thank you for your help."

"No, no, don't mention it. The principal should be waiting for us."

We speak to each other politely. I thought I'd put a tight lid on my heart, but that constant pain is always threatening to show. *If only Yukari felt the same*, I think as we walk side by side out of the staff room. We're on our way to the principal's office to formally submit her resignation.

“Ms. Yukino!” someone calls to us in the hallway, and one of the girls runs up to us.

It’s Hiromi Satou from year two. She’s a diligent student, but thanks to her vast and varied circle of friends, she ends up being a broadcast center for gossip. As I’m internally rolling my eyes with annoyance, other students spot Yukari and come running over, one or two at a time. “Ms. Yukino, Ms. Yukino,” they all call to her.

Look at them; they idolize you. And you’re quitting the school? I think for a moment, feeling an unwarranted, misplaced irritation. And yes, I know I’m the one who moved her resignation process forward.

In no time, the students have us surrounded, and Yukari is getting anxious. I pull myself together for a round of reprimands.

“Satou, leave it for later, all right? That goes for the rest of you, too.”

The students look at me as if they’ve got a bone to pick. Their eyes are more intense than I expected, and I almost flinch. Yukari steps in to mediate.

“I’m sorry, guys. I’ll be at school until after fifth period, so come talk to me later. I’ll have time then.”

Reluctantly, the students back off. “Let’s go,” I tell Yukari. Just as we begin walking, I catch a glimpse of Takao Akizuki out of the corner of my eye. Out of nowhere, I wonder if he knew about Yukari, too.

“Ms. Yukino, I’m sure you’re well aware of this by now, but here’s the thing about teachers: They get to work before eight, they’re tied down here until close to five, but of course they can’t go home at five, and they don’t receive overtime benefits. It’s taken for granted that they’ll work on the weekends, they take salary cuts because people demand that their pay be kept in line with the private sector, and they’re reviled for having pensions that are significantly higher than the private sector’s. They get no respect from students or their guardians, the education they provide is criticized as useless even though they’re only complying with the requirements of the Ministry of Culture, and yet they’re compelled to fly the flag and sing the national anthem together because they’re public servants. They have to keep the Board of Education happy, and the parent, and the students, and the public. This is a worthless job.”

What the hell is he talking about? I wonder, watching the vice-principal’s face. Yukari is sitting quietly on the sofa, listening with her head bowed, but when I glance over at her, I can spot a faint smile in her eyes. The principal’s office is well insulated from the outside, and only the slight hum of the air conditioner and the muffled racket of the students on their lunch break reach us.

The four of us—Yukari and I, the principal and vice-principal—are sitting on black reception sofas, facing each other across a table. For a while now, the principal has been sipping tea as if he accidentally wandered into the wrong meeting. Meanwhile, the vice-principal keeps talking.

“You see, Ms. Yukino, if I were just a little younger, I would love to quit public education once and for all and open a cram school. There’s really no reason for students or teachers to stay in a place that’s treating them poorly. I’m a little too old to quit now, though.”

Was that just a joke I didn’t get? No, the vice-principal is just being excessively candid. I can’t say I fully sympathize with him, but his opinion does create some heat in my chest.

“It’s a shame to lose you, but I have no choice but to accept your letter of resignation. To tell the truth, I am a little jealous.”

After he’s finished speaking, the vice-principal sends the principal a silent signal with his eyes. The principal picks up the resignation request from the table.

“Thank you for all your hard work, Ms. Yukino,” he says briefly.

“I’m terribly sorry for all the trouble I caused you. Thank you very much for everything these past two and a half years.”

Yukari bows her head deeply, her voice full of dignity.

The short version is, Yukari quit because her mind and body fell so out of tune that she couldn’t come to school. To put it in familiar terms, it was burnout. But the reality of it wasn’t so easy to put into words. I can share my side of it, and so can everyone else involved with the whole thing, but I’m pretty sure nobody really understands exactly what happened.

The first sign I remember came up last September, about nine months after I’d hugged Yukari on Christmas. Naturally, we’d been keeping our relationship a secret from both the students and the other teachers.

“Mr. Itou, do you know Shouko Aizawa in my class?”

Yukari’s question came after we’d had dinner at my apartment. For a former salesman like me, the custom of calling each other Mr. or Ms. (the way our students did) felt strange, and I’d started calling Yukari by her first name in private. Meanwhile, Yukari kept on calling me Mr. Itou. “It’s a habit,” she’d once told me. “I just can’t seem to correct it.” I didn’t like the distance it created, but at the same time, that clumsiness was endearing.

“Sure, I know her. I was her first-year homeroom teacher. She was hard to forget with her looks and personality, but there weren’t any real problems with her.”

As I said it, I remembered that Aizawa had provided me with that initial impetus to confess my feelings to Yukari, but of course I couldn’t tell her that.

“I see… Miss Aizawa is in my class now, and—”

According to Yukari, when the second term began, Aizawa’s attitude had abruptly changed. Up until then, she’d had a puppylike adoration for Yukari, but lately she’d started lashing out.

“She’s intentionally late to my classes, and when I speak to her, she ignores me.”

“Hmm. Yeah, the kids can practically change into different people over that month of summer vacation.”

As I answered, I searched my memory for details on Shouko Aizawa. If I remembered right, her dad was a manager at a famous advertising agency, and her family was fairly well off, with a place in Shoutou. The girl was also extremely attractive and tended to get a lot of stares, which seemed to have gone to her head, but at least as a first-year, she hadn't caused trouble. That said, I had no idea what was going on in the hearts of the female students. The school separated the guys and girls for phys ed, and once you weren't their homeroom teacher anymore, you just lost track of them.

I think I just told Yukari I'd keep an eye on her, but I never thought it would be a big deal. After all, minor problems with students were a really common thing for any teacher.

But Yukari and Aizawa's situation just kept rolling downhill and gaining speed all the way to the end of the year. Aizawa led the class in a group boycott of Yukari's lessons, and students who talked to Yukari started getting shunned by the rest. Aizawa was a surprisingly charismatic ringleader, and before too long, most of the class was hostile to Yukari. When it started affecting her lessons, Yukari's position in the staff room rapidly worsened as well. Naturally, she was completely exhausted.

But even after all that, I thought it was a problem she should manage herself. She came to me for advice several times, but the third term was a busy one already, and I just couldn't bring myself to believe that the trouble was 100 percent Aizawa's fault. Yukari had to be doing something wrong, too, which meant she should have plenty of options that didn't involve other people. We'd chosen to become teachers of our own free will, and the job had always included stuff like this. I even believed that her resolving the problem herself would ultimately be in her best interest.

Before long, a rumor that Yukari had made a pass at Aizawa's boyfriend began to spread through the school. It was ridiculous gossip, patent kid stuff, but I still got curious and looked into it. Apparently, Aizawa's boyfriend had developed a one-way crush on Yukari and told her how he felt. Of course Yukari had turned him down, but it had stung Aizawa's pride. When I asked Yukari, she wouldn't tell me exactly who the boy was, but she more or less confirmed the rest.

I dug deeper and managed to identify the kid who'd made the love confession, a third-year named Makino. To make matters worse, he was in my homeroom, and the captain of the basketball club, which I'd advised until the previous year. I really debated whether I should talk with him about it. Makino was a good student with a strong sense of responsibility. Even if he had fallen for Yukari, that wasn't his fault. Still, he was in a relationship with Aizawa, so he shouldn't go behind her back. Should I point that out to him? On the other hand, I was secretly dating Yukari myself. What right did I have to put Makino in his place when I was already feeling guilty myself? I hesitated—and I really shouldn't have. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, but I should've done it, my own convenience be damned.

While I dragged my feet, the situation spiraled completely out of control. A fire may be set by human hands, but after a certain point, the flames are spreading on their own. Hatred and antipathy are the same way. By the end, it isn't even clear who started it; it keeps burning until the very last beam comes crashing down.

I know that now. That beam was probably Yukari's sense of taste, her spirit, her body. By the time the rumor spread to the students' parents, Yukari couldn't even come to school anymore because of the harassment. And even then, I couldn't stop seeing her absences from work as a kind of failure of self-sufficiency. The circumstances didn't matter; she should come to school, confront Aizawa, and solve her own problem. It had to still be possible. I was so sure of it.

It was a long, dark, painful winter for everybody.

My dad, who'd been living in our family home in Sendai, passed away that winter. He was past eighty—I was a late baby. By the time they found his pancreatic cancer, it was already Stage IV. My father had refused the treatment, which would have been painful, and passed away peacefully after six months in palliative care. He'd probably had conflicting feelings about everything, but right to the end, he never showed his son anything resembling weakness. I went to visit him just a few days before he died, and I still remember what he told me.

"I don't have much of anything to leave you, but…," he'd said. "Just… make sure you find somebody you can love more deeply than yourself. If you can manage that, you've got it made in life."

When I broke up with Yukari, my dad's wish for me was what I remembered.

Had I loved Yukari more than I loved myself? Probably not. I'd been paralyzed since long before things had gotten this bad. Before, my attraction to her had felt like the pull of some unfathomable vortex; before, I would have begged for the chance to marry her. Except…those feelings hadn't changed, actually, or even weakened. And yet I let go of her hand so easily, it seemed unreal.

Something had been lost to me forever, and I'd never even noticed. There had been a bond between us once, one that might have grown stronger and stouter if it weren't for this mess. And we'd lost it for eternity.

On that freezing, snowy March night, when Yukari visited my apartment for the first time in quite a while, I knew this was the end for us the moment I saw her. It was less that I understood it logically and more as if I were watching thick rain clouds approach over a plain with nothing to obstruct the view. Our breakup was simply right there in front of me.

Yukari had cut her long hair so short that it didn't even reach her shoulders. Her eyes no longer held any of the affection and trust they had once held. All I could see was exhaustion, fear, and suspicion. I finally, *finally* realized that I'd been just as culpable as Aizawa and her cronies in bringing her to this.

“I’m really sorry,” Yukari said, in that trembling voice that always touched my heart like a gentle caress. “I’m sorry for the trouble I’ve caused you. We really do need to end this, don’t we?”

Come to think of it, I’d even forced her to say those last words to me, too. While I watched her boarding an empty city bus from the stop near my apartment, I realized I’d encountered a miracle—and yet, without even lifting a finger, I’d managed to bury it forever.

The bell that encourages students to head home echoes through the depopulated school building.

The next thing I know, everything around me is dyed a blazing sunset, the sort you see after a typhoon has passed. Yukari has finished packing up her belongings, and from the staff room window, I watch her walk through the school gate alone. Several students run up and grab her, crying. Yukari is saying something to them, her expression gentle. As I gaze at her smile, tinted by the lonely red of the sunset, it occurs to me that neither of us ever shed a tear, not even at the end.

* * *

We had a lot of typhoons that autumn.

Huge masses of wind and rain came to shake up the air of the Kanto area, suddenly bringing summer heat or winter cold like a series of pranks. But autumn still gradually deepened, turning the leaves of the gingko trees along the street yellower the more the sun touched them. The leaves fell little by little, the people’s clothes thickened one layer at a time, and at last the season gave way to winter.

I’ll probably never see Yukari again. I really should have spent my whole life with her, but her time with me is over. That regret might never leave me until I die. But just as the ground slowly absorbs moisture even after the rain has stopped, Yukari has left a few epilogues behind.

On that day in the second term when Yukari left the school, there was an incident. After class, Takao Akizuki got into a fistfight with several third-year students. An eyewitness reported it, and I went to break it up. It was less a fight than Akizuki getting beat up. Shouko Aizawa was there in that group of third-year kids, and she looked upset. My understanding was that Akizuki had started it by hitting her, but nobody would give me any more details. There wasn’t a mark on Aizawa, while Akizuki’s face was bruised and dark.

Technically, we should have treated this as a serious act of violence, but I couldn’t drag any of the particulars out of them. Everyone was in the deep shadow that Yukari’s absence had left behind. But I thought that Akizuki had done what I’d never been able to do. I bundled the protesting kid into a taxi bound for the hospital, and as I glanced at him, sitting sullen and silent in the rear seat, I realized I was just a little fond of him. He was probably living with a world inside him, invisible to everyone and certainly to me.

It was the end of December, with New Year’s just around the corner, when I spotted Shouko Aizawa in town during vacation.

School was already out for winter break. I'd been wandering around Shibuya with no particular destination in mind when I happened to see Aizawa sitting in the window of a café. She was by herself, languidly smoking a cigarette. In her mocha-colored leather jacket, bold makeup, and bleached curls, most people would've taken her for a college student. No one would've questioned it.

I went into the café, plopped down next to Aizawa, and wordlessly took the cigarette away from her. She looked at me, startled. I was wearing a stocking cap, pulled down low, and a down jacket instead of my tracksuit, and she didn't seem to recognize me.

"If you're going to smoke, do it so you don't get caught," I told her, stubbing her cigarette out in the ashtray. After staring at me for a while, Aizawa finally snapped back at me.

"Oh, it's Mr. Itou. Stay out of my private life, all right?"

She didn't look the slightest bit ashamed. Even so, she struck me as awfully sad and alone, and I just couldn't get up the energy to reprimand her. I took out a cigarette of my own and lit it. The puff of smoke was absolutely my way of showing off, and Aizawa glared at me resentfully. I looked through the window at the people passing by outside.

"…Did something happen to you?" I asked.

"Of course it did. I can't go a day without 'something happening,'" Aizawa murmured.

That was a blunt reply. I studied her face, and from this distance, her cheeks and forehead still seemed like a child's. Her eyes were red and damp, as if she'd been crying until just a minute before. *This poor thing*, I thought. *She can try as hard as she wants to look mature, and she has her whole class wrapped around her finger—but she's still just a kid.*

"…What about you, Mr. Itou? Did something happen?" Aizawa asked.

Maybe my silence had made things awkward or uncomfortable.

—Me? Did something happen to me?

"I…"

What had happened to bring me *here*?

"A long time ago…"

A long time ago, I'd let a student get hurt.

It was back when I'd just started teaching. At the first school I was assigned to, one of the first things the principal told me was "Itou, as far as the students are concerned, you're the bad cop." He wanted me to reprimand the kids and keep them on edge. Their homeroom teachers would take care of the rest. Naive as I was, I'd wanted to be the kind of teacher who built relationships akin to friendships with his students, so I was really disappointed with the advice.

So I rebelled. I'd stuck it out through three years in sales, a job that had never been my thing, and finally gotten the teaching job I'd wanted for years. I had ideals of my own.

But when they put me in charge of the handball club, those ideals were shattered. During a practice match with another school, one of the kids on my team crashed into a goalpost and gave himself a concussion. His life was never in danger, but the sight in his left eye would never be the same.

It was a shock. I had no idea how to begin to make up for that. Since it had been an accident during a game, I wasn't held responsible, and neither the student nor his parents blamed me. But I knew I had failed to remind my kids to straighten up and look sharp, and the regret ate at me. Accidents and injuries happen when you relax. The role of a phys ed teacher was, first and foremost, not to let students get hurt.

And so in my first year of teaching, I resolved to be the guy who made you straighten up whenever he walked by. I'd yell at them, even when it wasn't completely fair. I'd be the terror of the school, the one who never gave them a chance to let their guard down.

"'A long time ago' what?"

"…Nothing. Don't smoke. It boosts your risk of lung cancer, it wrecks your skin, and it's expensive."

"Don't tell me that when you're breathing it in my face!"

Aizawa waved a hand to dispel the cloud from my lungs, genuinely grumpy. She looked so much like a little kid, I had to laugh.

"Seriously, Mr. Itou, what is with you?!"

"Ha-ha, sorry. I haven't ordered yet, so I'm gonna go get some coffee. Want anything? My treat."

Aizawa eyed me dubiously, but I just stood up. If Yukari was gone for good, then I had to make a change of some sort. And if there was anything I could do now for the woman I'd never see again, it would definitely have to do with Shouko Aizawa.

"Huh, for real? Why? Um, okay-okay, so, a mocha chip Frappuccino!"

I lifted a hand to acknowledge the order without looking back, and I started walking.

Masurawo ya / katakohisemu to / nagekedomo / shiko no masurawo / naho kohi ni keri

(*Man'yoshu* volume 2:117)

Translation: To think that I, / a man so desirable, / should have these unrequited feelings! / And yet to mourn thus is a disgrace, / and I only yearn for you more.

Context: A poem Prince Toneri wrote for Toneri no Otome. As a government official, he was a worthy man, yet his uncontrollable feelings of love confounded him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The One I Idolized, Drawing Eyebrows on a Rainy Morning, What I Deserve.
—Shouko Aizawa

I wish I'd just run into somebody. I wish somebody would take me away from here.

As I'm spacing out in a café, thinking pointless things, I run into Mr. Itou, of all people. Just as I notice this ridiculously built guy plopping down next to me, he plucks the cigarette right out of my mouth.

What?! Who the hell?! For a moment, I panic a little. When I stare at the man in the stocking cap, trying to get a handle on the situation, it turns out to be Mr. Itou. He was my homeroom teacher during my first year, but he always wears his tracksuit and looks like a gym teacher at school, so I didn't recognize him. He's wearing a quilted down jacket with the collar standing straight up, and he seems even more like a thug than he does at school.

He's a stern-looking teacher, and the kids are pretty scared of him, but for some reason, he doesn't tell me off about smoking today. (He does say to knock it off, but he kinda doesn't seem to care.) He even buys me a caramel Frappuccino. (I'd actually told him to get a mocha chip, but he got it wrong.) "Here, I got you the really big one," he says, shoving a venti in my face.

"…Thank you."

I take a sip through the straw, and he watches me steadily. I can't relax. Talk about uncomfortable. What in the world is this about?

"What do you think, Shouko Aizawa? Is it good?"

Why is he calling me by my full name? I answer in a small voice, "…It's okay."

"What?"

"Yes. It is."

"I see. Okay then, once winter break is over, come to the career guidance office."

"Huh?"

"You drank that, remember?"

"Oh, come on, that's dirty!"

"So you learned something: Nothing's more expensive than 'free.'"

"Seriously, what is your problem? You're the one who offered to buy it for me!"

I keep grumbling, but Mr. Itou ignores me, reminds me of the career counseling date again, then makes a quick exit from the café with his latte in hand. Ugh, geez. That's so frustrating and annoying, but…

But I still feel a faint, ticklish happiness, as though someone's roughly tousled my hair. Even though it's December of my third year of high school, I still haven't decided what I want to do with my life. For the whole year, no matter what anyone around me said, I kept turning in my "desired course"

forms blank. By now, I should be a sort of untouchable entity for the teachers: As long as I at least graduate, they should be happy… Although even I don't really understand why things turned out this way.

I've finished my gigantic Frappuccino, and the cityscape is actually brighter than the sky now. I can't just camp out in here forever, so I put on my face mask, stick my earbuds into my ears, wrap my scarf around my neck, put on my black stocking cap, and shuffle out of the café. I'd really like to wear sunglasses, too, but it would make me look way too suspicious, so for now I keep my eyes lowered as I start down the hill road. I've drawn on eyebrows, added extra eyelashes, and put on blush and lipstick, but out in town, I keep all of it under wraps. What on earth am I trying to do? The light is glaring off the streets, and for the moment I just walk with no idea where I should actually go. It feels as if I'm in a nightmare that's dragging on forever, looking for the exit. It has to exist.

* * *

I wish somebody would take me away from here.

How long have I held that wish? Was it since middle school? Since late elementary school?

What did I hate so much about "here"? The boys, for starters. Half the world, in other words. I also hated the social system that said I could never be happy unless I got married to one of those boys. So I was already done with the majority of the world.

Who the hell would like something that whispered or screamed, "Ugly" or "Fatty" or "Die" at you when you walked by in the halls? Look at you, you're dirty and smelly and covered in zits and can't go two minutes without thinking about sex.

I didn't like Dad or my big brother much, either. There was an unspoken understanding at my house that Dad had a lover somewhere else, and my brother (who was three years older than me, went to a famous private school, and hadn't been without a girlfriend since grade school) was always looking down his nose at me and asking, "Are you sure we're related?"

In a world overflowing with awful, disgusting boys, the rampant obsession with romance among middle and high schoolers was even more exhausting. Actually, it was even worse than that; lately, people seemed to take it for granted that even elementary schoolers would be in love. Magazines meant for grade schoolers ran articles like "Hugely popular with today's little fashionistas! Hot clothes that will make you look slim and curvaceous, even if you've got a teddy bear figure!" *Girls have good figures so they'll be popular? What's "a teddy bear figure" anyway? And magazines for elementary school girls shouldn't go calling them "little fashionistas."* As a grade schooler, it all made me so bitter and angry and hopeless. Even in middle school, I refused to have anything to do with gossip about love interests.

"I mean, who really cares what happened with the Ashikaga clan anyway?"

“Argh, I can’t handle Japanese history, either. And also, ‘Ashikaga’? How do you get that reading out of those characters? Sure it’s not ‘Ashiri’?”

“I think I may actually like English better.”

“Hmm. We’re Japanese, though. It’s not like we’re ever going to America.”

“Yeah, well. I guess it is kinda pointless, huh.”

That was why my conversations with my friend Saya at lunch were always about stuff like that. “It sure is hot today, huh” or “It’s cold, huh” or “There’s a typhoon, huh” or “It must be because of El Niño, huh.” Looking back, I was so unsexy that I feel kinda bad for myself.

In middle school, when I was right in the middle of my unpopular period, I had two close friends: Saya and Teshigawara. We’d all gone to the same elementary school. Saya was a plain, short, pudgy, black-haired girl like me, and Teshigawara was just as plain, but male. In middle school, groups were usually either all guys or all girls, but Teshigawara stuck with us two girls as if it didn’t bother him one bit. Maybe it was because he still thought like an elementary schooler. He got carried away easily, but he never said anything mean to me. As far as I was concerned, Teshigawara wasn’t a guy.

It goes without saying that our trio was at the bottom of the school hierarchy. Most of our class didn’t speak to us unless they had to because of something to do with school. The privileged cool kids actively treated us like we were gross, and the teachers weren’t interested in us. For people in our social stratum, their expectations were clear: “You’re totally harmless, but if possible, don’t go anyplace where we can see you.” *Well, middle schoolers are total brats anyway*, I thought, feeling like a wiser brat than the rest. But I still wasn’t happy with it.

“Aizawa, Aizawa, c’mere a sec, this is nuts!”

After class one day during our second year in middle school, Teshigawara waved me over, looking excited. “What?” I asked curtly, but I went over to the seat by the window. Saya was there, hunched over, writing for dear life with a mechanical pencil. She was doing one of the numwords we’d all been crazy about lately. *Numwords* was short for “numbered crossword puzzles.” Every square is numbered, and all the squares with the same number have to have the same letter.

“Teshi-Teshi brought this book in, and I think we’ve almost got this one,” Saya said, gazing down at her hands and looking serious.

Teshigawara explained with way too much enthusiasm, “So this puzzle is called ‘Surviving Everyday Life’—it’s twelve letters, we’ve got some *p*’s and *e*’s, and the one in the nine squares is probably *s*. If we get this one, we’ll have the whole thing solved!”

I leaned back to avoid the spit, but I was paying attention to what he said.

Teshigawara’s name made him sound like some sort of handsome, court noble type of guy, but not even the smoothest diplomat could have called him good-looking. He was tall and skinny, with weirdly long arms and legs,

and he had the thick eyebrows and long, shaggy hair of a deserting samurai. Like the "long-arm, long-leg" monsters I'd seen in a youkai dictionary. He was weirdly friendly with me, and whenever he saw me, he'd yell, "Aizawa, Aizawa!" in this loud voice. Every time I heard Saya call him Teshi-Teshi, I'd think, *What's with this "Teshi-Teshi" business, huh? It's way too cute for him.*

"It's probably 'peer pressure,'" I said, after thinking a little.

"Hmm?" Teshigawara said, twisting his youkai face in a grimace.

"…Oh, you're right! That makes the verticals 'trick,' 'liar,' and 'virtual'! 'Peer pressure,' that's it! Of course you'd get it, Shouko!"

"Whoa! Aizawa, you're awesome! Gotta press those piers, huh? I see!"

You have no idea what that phrase is, I thought, but snarking back at him felt like work, and I couldn't help smiling at all the praise. Still, what a harsh puzzle. "Surviving Everyday Life," "peer pressure."

It's true, though. If you want to survive life, you have to fight peer pressure. Girls should be like this; urban teen girls should make themselves trendy; we should be constantly in love. You had to either keep fighting the pressure—or be on the side that exerted it.

In the spring of my third year of junior high, I made up my mind. I was completely worn out by this endless fight with life. Wouldn't it be better to go over to *that* side? *Actually, I should do that*, I resolved. By now, I understood that nobody was ever going to show up and take me away from "here." I'd just have to get myself out.

"I've made up my mind! I'm going to be up on all the latest fashions. I'll change my whole life—you won't even recognize me!"

I made that declaration to Saya and Teshigawara on the way home after school, as we watched the Shibuya River trickle by from the Route 246 pedestrian bridge. They both gaped at me as, behind them, cars roared past on the elevated Metropolitan Expressway.

"Actually, we should do it together! Tokyo fourteen-year-olds aren't supposed to spend lunch and the time after school in a corner of the classroom doing numwords and shogi and Ouija! It's like telling everybody, 'Hey, we're a bunch of weirdos, so you'd better not come near us!'"

The other two had no idea how to react to my sudden proposal.

"No, Shouko, don't! We promised we'd never change, remember?! We promised we wouldn't grow up!" Saya said, getting agitated and bringing up a promise I had no recollection of ever making. (I'm pretty sure she mixed up the lyrics of some J-pop song with reality.)

With an utterly serious expression on his youkai face, Teshigawara put a hand on my shoulder and leaned in. "Aizawa, if something's troubling you, tell me about it. Just me." I wanted to ask him who he thought he was with a line like that, but then behind us, a group of cool guys walked by.

"These geeky weirdos always look like they're having fun," they commented, loudly enough for us to hear.

"…Listen, even if I change, we'll always be friends," I told them with tears in my eyes. For some reason, I'd said something that sounded like a line from a drama, too.

The first thing I did was practice makeup. I bought a magazine for popular types at the bookstore and stared at the page about "LOVE makeup that will win you his ♥ ." After consulting the article, I decided that of the options for my face—"Round," "Ethereal," "Showy," and "Retro"—mine was Retro (which was a bit humiliating). I carefully chose cosmetics from Mom's huge collection of makeup, and after several tear-inducing failures, I drew "plump lower eyelids" and "casually cut those unwanted pudgy cheeks" and used "blush for a fresh, delicate face" and added "lip lines for glossy, plump lips."

After that, I grabbed my allowance for a beauty salon I'd carefully picked out online. Placing a phone call in a trembling voice, I made a reservation for three days later, and for that interim period, I was so tense, I couldn't eat much (although, thanks to that, I lost just a little weight).

The glass-walled beauty salon in Ura-Harajuku where I got my hair cut looked like an aquarium—but when they were done, and I saw my reflection in the mirror, I was startled. I'd gotten a tiny bit cuter, if I did say so myself. My too-thick black hair had been thinned out and streamlined, my newly asymmetrical bangs brushed my eyebrows softly, and the tips of the locks that hung down on either side of my face curled inward just above my collarbones. Thanks to my makeup techniques and my new hairstyle framing them, my formerly Retro face now looked as if it belonged to a passably modern girl. Maybe, just maybe, my attempt could work. In that moment, I sensed something like potential.

The next step should have been a diet, but in the end, it wasn't necessary. After May was over, the moment I turned fifteen, I started shedding weight. It was like a switch hidden deep in my genes had suddenly been flipped. I grew quickly, too. My round, stubby baby fingers grew slim and long, my voice and skin suddenly seemed to actually belong to a slim, pale girl, and my boobs grew heavier and heavier. As the crowning touch, my one remaining baby tooth (and the source of a massive complex) finally fell out and got replaced by a permanent tooth.

Kachak. I could almost hear myself switching over—like a toggle, or a rail switch, or a version upgrade.

On the last night of summer vacation, I dyed my hair in the bathroom. It was a dark brown, with just a hint of orange. I took up the skirt of my uniform, too, by myself. I'd always been good at sewing and knitting and basic handiwork like that, so I dragged out the sewing machine that was gathering dust in the storage room and whipped out a blind-stitched hem like it was nothing. *Clink, clink, clink, clink*: The sound of the machine's advancing needle was like the noise of the vehicle that was going to take me away from "here."

Late at night, I put on my uniform and inspected my new self in the full-length mirror on the stairway landing. The girl in front of me looked like one of the models in the magazines for popular types. I twirled in place. The highlights in my hair glowed softly orange, while my pale thighs beneath the short skirt were kind of sexy (if I did say so myself) and made my heart beat faster.

"Maybe you weren't dumped on the doorstep after all."

My brother was looking down at me from the second floor. I was happy I'd made him say that, but at the same time, I didn't like the way his eyes wouldn't leave me. I didn't respond.

"Waaaaaaah, what the heck?! You're so cute!"

"Really? You think so? It isn't weird? I'm not, like, trying too hard, am I?"

"Not at all! So like, um, I feel like I can be honest about this now, but when you started messing around with makeup, I was a little worried you were kinda pushing yourself? But it's perfect! You're totally adorable! I bet you're gonna get scouted—don't you dare go to Harajuku or they'll flag you down. Wait, maybe that means you actually should go? Yeah, you should! Let's go to Harajuku!"

In September, after summer vacation was over, Saya sincerely complimented my new look in the classroom. My greatest fear had been the idea that she might hate me, and I was so relieved, I could have cried. I started looking forward to seeing how Teshigawara would react. And right then, his youkai face and hunched shoulders walked into the classroom.

"Good morning!" I called.

He shot me a startled glance, then slunk right on by. Jerk. I smacked the back of his head.

"I said good morning, Teshigawara!"

Teshigawara gave me a frightened glance, promptly looked away, then looked back at me. His mouth fell open so far, I practically heard it hit the ground, and his expression turned to one of shock.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa, Aizawa?!"

Wow. So he hadn't even recognized me.

"You…" Teshigawara broke off, then pulled me out into the hall and spoke in a whisper. "Hey, did something happen at home? If you've got any problems, you can tell me anything."

"Is that literally the only thing you can say?!"

As I retorted with disgust, I realized that the angle from which I was looking up at Teshigawara's face hadn't changed. I'd grown, and Saya's head was lower now. So…had this guy gotten taller, too, then? Before I could become conscious of anything, my face abruptly turned red, and I hastily went back into the classroom.

After the second term started, I might as well have been in a different world.

Everyone I passed at school, both guys and girls, looked at me. I heard voices whispering “Who’s that?” and “She’s so cute.” Every time it happened, Saya and Teshigawara seemed kind of uncomfortable, but I felt like a sunny day after endless rain.

What had changed more than anything else was the guys—specifically how they looked at and acted around me. I felt their eyes on my legs and hips and bust and face when I was simply walking through the station or down the street, or just riding the train. I never knew the men of the world would stare so rudely at strangers.

I started occasionally encountering perverts on packed trains, and every experience was utterly nauseating. When I discussed it with Saya, she suggested that it was because I looked relatively meek. I made my makeup sharper and dyed my hair a lighter shade, and that alone was enough to cut down the number of perverts significantly. I was exactly the same on the inside, and yet simply changing my appearance had changed the world’s reactions dramatically. The idea startled and bewildered me, and I felt both a little disillusionment and an odd sort of pleasure.

One day, when the three of us were doing a numword after school, somebody said, “Hey, Shouko, gimme a little of that” and snatched the strawberry juice I’d been drinking. Startled, I looked to see where it had gone and discovered it in the hand of a member of the cool guys group.

He’d just called my name like we were friends or something and stolen an indirect kiss from my straw, but the only ones who found it strange were the three of us; the cool kids didn’t seem to think anything of it. After that, a group of fashion-conscious girls pulled me in, and I started hanging out with them. Before long, Saya began using makeup as well, and we’d walk through Harajuku after school with the other girls, and the sketchy-looking scouts really did flag us down. I screeched and squealed loudly with my new friends as we walked through town, not caring what people thought of us, and I thought, with relish, *Yes, this is it, this is what life as a Tokyo teen should be.*

The world was noticeably brighter and easier to live in.

Nobody made fun of me now. The world was kind to me, and forgiving. The only one who hadn’t changed was Teshigawara. He kept on lecturing me—“Your skirt is too short; take it back down!” and “I really don’t think it’s wise of you to be that friendly with guys you don’t know”—until I wanted to ask, *What are you, my dad?!*

In that sense, I realized that he was pretty reliable, and it made my opinion of him go up. But the three of us were gradually spending less and less time alone together. It wasn’t long until we stopped doing numwords after school; I wasn’t really sure whether we’d gotten tired of them and lost interest or gotten tired of our relationship itself.

Before we knew it, the graduation ceremony was upon us. Teshigawara ended up going to a boys’ school, and Saya and I went on to the same high school together. We’d been friends since elementary school, but the

relationship ended kind of vaguely, like the air gradually leaking out of a balloon.

High school life was solid fun right from the start.

The address book on my cell phone was bursting with new names, both guys' and girls', and once a week I'd stay over at a friend's house or goof around all night long at twenty-four-hour hamburger shops or someplace similar. Saya and I had joined the wind ensemble, but I was so busy having fun that I turned into a ghost member right away.

I also fell in love.

That said, it wasn't with a boy; I fell for the young female classics teacher. I don't think it was about wanting to get married, or wanting to date her, or wanting to touch her and have her touch me. I had almost no experience with romance, though, and there didn't seem to be anything else to call these feelings.

Her first class, I felt like a coastal fisherman spotting his first blue whale on a rare deep-sea fishing trip: *Whoa, lookit that, there's a natural beauty up on that thar platform!* …Is that too weird a metaphor? Anyway, what I'm getting at is that I was well versed enough in the artificial, cosmetic variety of beauty that I was a bit of an authority. I could tell right away that her light makeup wasn't there to enhance anything, but to mute it. She'd been gorgeous from the time she was a little girl. I couldn't even imagine a life where you needed to tone your beauty *down*. Her voice was sweet and gentle, and I concentrated like crazy in her class so I wouldn't miss hearing a single breath.

I wanted to hear her voice call my name, "Aizawa," and I put an abnormal amount of effort into studying just for classics, because I wanted to be able to give a flawless answer when she did call on me. The teacher was fair to everybody, and she was a very good person. Even if I'd still had my middle-school looks, I doubt she would have treated me any differently. For some reason, I was sure of that.

Her name was Ms. Yukari Yukino.

"Oh, Ms. Yukino! Are you headed home now?"

Whenever I spotted Ms. Yukino after school, I'd run up to her at full speed. I didn't even hide the fact that my tail was wagging. I thought, time and time again, how great it would be if Ms. Yukino were my homeroom teacher instead of burly Mr. Itou. (Not that I hated him, though—he was one of the few men who didn't have that look in their eyes.)

"Oh, Aizawa. No, I still have some work to do in the staff room."

Oh my God, oh my God! She said my name!

"I'll wait until you're done, then. Let's go home together, Ms. Yukino."

"I don't think so. I'll be here for a while."

"I'll wait for you."

"You'd better not."

"Tell me your e-mail address, then."

“Where’s this coming from?” Ms. Yukino asked, smiling and admonishing me gently. “I’m just a teacher. You’ve only just started high school, Aizawa. You should go make friends your own age first.”

Her tone was kind, but Ms. Yukino just would not let her guard down. That’s not true. I’ve already got contact info for a bunch of the male teachers, and college guys and businessmen are always chatting me up at parties. But the one I really want to get to know better is you, Ms. Yukino.—Still, that’s not the kind of thing you can say aloud. All I could do was keep pining for her.

I’d been at the ticket gate for three hours already, since ten in the morning, and three guys had spoken to me. I knew from experience that there would have been a whole lot more at Shibuya or Harajuku or Shinjuku, but this was Sendagaya. The place was full of uptight athletic types, and almost nobody gave me the once-over. *So this is where she lives*, I thought. *It’s relaxed and spread out—it does feel a little like her. Should’ve guessed.*

I’d dressed up a little bit, in a white knit dress and a black Chesterfield coat, and I was leaning against a pillar in front of the ticket gate. Right across the street, the shell-like silver roof of the Tokyo Metropolitan Gymnasium was glaring in the autumn sunlight.

“Say, are you waiting for somebody?”

Here comes number four. I didn’t exactly hate the attention—I’d never go with them, but I did feel my value was being recognized. This guy was a slender, more effeminate type in too-fancy clothes.

“Yep. My boyfriend,” I responded, keeping my face blank.

“But you’ve been all by yourself for ages,” he insisted—just as I heard a sweet, familiar voice from elsewhere.

“…Aizawa? Oh, it *is* you. What’s one of my students doing here? Oh—are you with a friend?”

“Mi—M-Ms. Yukino!”

Ms. Yukino was right in front of me, dressed a little more casually than usual in a beige tie-waist coat. My stalking gambit had paid off—I’d finally met the person I’d been waiting for all this time, and yet I just felt embarrassed.

When he realized Ms. Yukino was my teacher, the guy made a silent exit.

“He was a total stranger!”

“Hmm. Were you waiting for someone?”

“No, um, I—Sho-sho-shogi!”

“Shogi?”

“Um, I came to pay my respects to the god of shogi!” I said the first thing that popped into my head, remembering the statue of a shogi pawn on the station platform.

Ms. Yukino’s eyes softened with understanding.

“Yes, we do have that shrine around here, don’t we? I didn’t know you played shogi, Aizawa. That’s wonderful.”

The smile she gave me then would've been enough to melt anyone into a puddle of goo. *Aaaaaaah! If anyone's wonderful here, it's you!*

The rest of that day only got better from there. I said I'd finished my visit to the shrine (a lie, of course), and that I was thinking of going to the park for a little while.

"I was just thinking of doing a little reading in the park myself," said Ms. Yukino, and so we went together. My teacher even paid my ¥200 entry fee ("Just this once, all right?"). I'd brought a box lunch, the product of skills cultivated during my years as an ugly duckling, and we split it between us. We gossiped about school, I told her things about my family situation that would get me sympathy points, and my teacher told me about the books she liked and her own experiences in high school.

In no time at all, the autumn sun began to go down. We left once we heard the announcement warning us the park was about to close, and Ms. Yukino walked me to my bus stop. When we turned a corner in a cozy mixed neighborhood of houses and low buildings, the evening sun flared straight through the gap between two buildings, illuminating us like a spotlight. When I looked over my shoulder, our shadows stretched over the asphalt forever, sharp and clear. Ms. Yukino was glowing in a transparent halo of orange light.

I want to glow like her someday, I prayed. *Let me become like her. And let this happiness last forever.* But it didn't matter what I wanted; the sun suddenly vanished behind the buildings, shrouding us in cold ultramarine.

I had wanted to tell her something, no matter what. It was why I'd secretly found out which train station she used and had ambushed her there on the morning of one of her days off…but I hadn't been able to put the "something" into words.

And so it went. My first year of high school was fun and happy, but I had the ticklish, tantalizing sense that there was something missing, and I just couldn't seem to remember the name of that particular spice.

Saya and I were in different classes, so by then, I had almost no opportunity to see her anymore. When we ran into each other in the corridors or at the station, we'd stop to chat. We now had practically nothing in common to talk about, but the spark did return a bit when we traded rumors about Teshigawara. He'd joined the cheer squad at his boys' school, and he'd started growing a beard, and for some reason, he'd dyed his hair blond.

Remembering Teshigawara was strangely depressing, though, and I hated feeling that way. "It's been a long time," I said brightly. "Why don't we get together and go somewhere fun, just the three of us? You, me, and Teshigawara."

"Good idea, he'll love it. I bet he'll start crying."

"No, I bet he'll try to be all cool about it."

"I can't wait."

"Yeah, I'll text you!"

But in the end, I never sent that text. Because I met Makino.

Because this time, as fate would have it, I fell in love with a boy.

I wish somebody would take me away from here.

I'd forgotten that feeling for a long time, but the moment I saw Makino on the subway, I remembered it. *Maybe he's the person I've been waiting for, all this time.*

It was April, and I'd just begun my second year of high school. On a crowded Ginza Line subway on the way home from school, I saw Makino leaning against a door, reading a paperback. I was standing by myself, near a door on the same side as his, but facing him across a row of seats. At school, he was always surrounded by gorgeous guys and girls, but now he was alone. It was surprising, but then again, I was alone, too.

Even though he was almost twenty feet away, I thought I could see sadness in his long eyelashes as they slanted down toward the words in his book. That was all, but it was enough to make me fall for him, head over heels.

Makino was famous at school. He was tall and handsome and captain of the basketball club; he was a good student, the teachers trusted him, and everyone around him was just as charismatic. I'd seen him walking alone with a girl from time to time, so when I decided to tell him how I felt, I expected to get shot down.

"You said your name was Shouko?" he said, his voice somewhat cool. He used my name as if we'd always been close. "I tend to be kinda selfish with the girl I go out with. You wouldn't mind?"

I couldn't believe that answer. *Yes, do! Be selfish with me, only me!* I couldn't say it out loud. With the gravity of one who's just discovered she has an incurable illness, I nodded, fighting back tears.

During the spring of my second year of high school, I was walking on air. For the first time in my life, I had a boyfriend, and he was the star of the school. This was the "something" I'd been missing.

Plus, starting in April, I finally got the homeroom teacher I'd been longing for: Ms. Yukino. It was like getting the Bon festival and New Year's at the same time, or Christmas and Halloween, or a wedding and the celebration of a birth. I don't even really know, but it was like all of life's blessings had come showering down on me all at once. I was giddy. Under the circumstances, it would have been impossible not to be. So when Makino was selfish, as he'd warned right at first he would be (and looking back, that was definitely a warning), it only made me happier.

"Huh? Shouko, did you curl your hair?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. I'm not used to doing it yet, so it isn't very good…," I replied, looking down.

"It looks good on you," he said, and he gently set his big hand on my head. That alone made my cheeks so hot, they felt like they were on fire.

"Aww, look, Shouko's bright red!"

"Makino, you lucky bastard. I want a girlfriend like that, too."

His friends all teased him. We'd fallen into the habit of walking back to the station together, after I waited for his club's practice to finish.

"Lay off. There's nobody at our school who's purer than Shouko." Makino laughed. After a lively exchange ("Get a load of this guy" and "Ugh, at least pay me to listen to you gushing about your girlfriend"), his friends went home on a different line. He and I boarded the train together.

It wasn't even a ten-minute ride to my station, but Makino said he wanted to spend as much time with me as he possibly could, so I stayed with him the extra twenty minutes until his station. Once it was just the two of us, he'd change a little. At first, it wasn't much, but little by little, he became a completely different person.

"Shouko, your hair…," he began, running his fingers through it and then tugging it, just a little rough. His voice was as gentle as it had been. Worried that he would wreck my hair after I'd put so much effort into it, I looked up at him. "You weren't kidding when you said you weren't used to this. It's terrible. Besides, I'd like to see you with brighter hair. I bet it'd look better on you."

Okay, I thought. On the way back home, I went right to a drugstore and looked for hair dye. I decided I'd go all out and grabbed a pink type, then dyed my hair that night. The next day at school, everybody complimented me on my new color. "How cute!" they said. "You look all mature."

But I couldn't relax until I was alone with Makino. When his friends weren't around anymore, he grabbed my hair and tore his fingers through it so hard, I worried it would come out. He was still wearing that tranquil smile. *Ow, ow, ow! I love you, I love you, I love you*, my hair screamed.

"Ha-ha! Man, now it looks ridiculous. You're not in a gang, you know. Black hair is better on you after all."

And so that night I re-dyed my hair black. Because of all the treatments in such a short time, my hair turned coarse and lost all its luster. But Makino's other face was for me and me alone, and that made me happy. In my own mind, I was lucky. All I could think about was what I could do to please him.

"You're a virgin, right, Shouko?"

After school, the moment the two of us were alone together in a third-year classroom, Makino brought up the topic out of nowhere. His mood was still exactly the same as a minute before, when he'd been talking with his friends about a cell phone game.

"Huh? Oh, ohhh, um…"

I wasn't sure whether to take it as a joke or not. Makino wanted something from me, and I couldn't afford to guess wrong. The fluorescent lights weren't on; outside, the dirt of the athletic field acted like a giant reflector and filled the classroom with indirect orange light. I could hear the after-school chatter in the halls beyond the door, like the faint noise from somebody else's headphones. I always thought this time of day was beautiful—it was the classic school experience.

“Well?”

In the light of the reflector, Makino’s well-formed features were unbelievably beautiful, like a magazine model’s. The hair at the nape of his neck shone softly. I had to answer him.

“Umm… Y-yes, I’m—Well, I’ve been abstinent!”

As I answered, I was so hideously embarrassed that I felt dizzy.

“Ha-ha, ‘abstinent,’ huh? Well, keep it that way until my birthday. I don’t even want to touch a girl who’s been with some other guy.”

As he said that, he put a hand against my hot cheek. His lips came nearer. A kiss! I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting for the sensation of his lips on mine. And waited. And waited. I heard a laugh.

“You look like a dog with your eyes squeezed shut like that, Shouko.”

I was so embarrassed, I almost burst into tears. Ohh, I’d have to practice being kissed, too. Would I be able to hang on to my sanity until Makino’s birthday next month?

In the orange light, his eyes were cool. Pain prickled across my skin, and the only word I had for that feeling was *happiness*.

“Sorry ’bout the wait! Let’s head home.” One of his friends poked his head into the classroom.

“Let’s go, Shouko,” Makino said gently.

My armpits were soaked with sweat, and it embarrassed me so much, I wanted to run away… But I couldn’t escape, not ever.

The summer was sweltering.

For the month up until Makino’s birthday, I was embarrassed to sweat or secrete anything that smelled in front of him, so I desperately cut down on my water intake until I collapsed from dehydration. Then I realized he might be disappointed if I was too thin, so I’d hastily go to beef bowl places in the middle of the night—but what if the cheap meat created BO? So I’d go to the bathroom and throw it up. I was like a blindfolded small animal, scurrying this way and that. When I managed to lose my virginity without incident, I was so relieved. To be honest, I was scared that Makino would dump me once I wasn’t a virgin anymore, but he did nothing of the sort. He was as kind to me as ever.

The day it happened was sweltering, too, I think.

After all, the unbearable heat didn’t let up for a single day that summer. But when I try to remember that day, I realize all the physical sensations are gone from my memory—things like sweat and temperature and humidity. From that day on, I think I lost sight of what I was feeling at all.

It was after school, right before summer vacation.

I’d just finished tallying up the class handouts, as Ms. Yukino had asked me to do, and I was on my way to the Japanese-language prep room. It felt like I was going to meet a friend after a long time apart. *Yaaaay, I’m going to go talk to Ms. Yukino!* Ever since Makino and his group had quit their club in June, I’d been so busy with him in one way and another that I hadn’t had time to have much fun with other people.

I climbed the stairs and turned into the corridor, but just as I was about to knock on the prep room door, I stopped. I could hear something that sounded like arguing inside. As I was wondering, *What should I do? Should I come back later?* I heard angry shouting.

"That's *enough*!"

The voice belonged to Ms. Yukino. Footsteps approached from beyond the door, and I ducked around the corner of the stairwell.

The uniformed boy who left the room was Makino. He was wearing the slightly cruel smile he sometimes showed me when we were alone, and he ambled off toward the third-year classrooms in his usual calm way, as if nothing had happened.

I didn't understand what had happened, and I think I stood there for a while, dazed, hugging the papers to my chest. I was sure I needed to know about whatever it was, though—or maybe it was something I couldn't afford to know. Quietly as I could, I made my way toward Makino's classroom. And then I heard several people roaring with laughter.

"Holy shit, Makino, are you serious? You actually took a shot at Yuki?"

"What a dumbass! You've got balls, man. There's no way she'd say yes!"

"I'm not so sure," I heard Makino say, as evenly as ever. "Women like her will give in if you push for long enough. I can see it in her face. She needs a man."

I didn't really grasp what they were talking about. I mean, of course I knew what the words meant, but everything in me was rejecting them.

That day, Makino went home by himself, without saying anything to me. He hadn't done that since we'd started going out. He called my phone once, but I didn't answer.

On the way home, and after I got inside, and in the bath, the possibilities kept circling around and around in my head. Maybe every single word I'd heard that day was a delusion; maybe I'd simply heard wrong. I thought so long and hard that I gave myself a killer headache. I desperately wanted to text Makino. I prayed frantically that he'd call or text me again. He could be as selfish as he wanted; I just wanted him to tell me what to do, what to be.

But nothing came. I'd known it wouldn't. He'd called me once, so now it was my turn. He would never call me twice in a row; it was an unbreakable rule. We hadn't talked it over and decided on it, but I knew in my bones.

In homeroom the next morning, Ms. Yukino was no different from usual. She didn't strike me as desperate for a man. I must have just misunderstood what I'd heard the day before. During lunch, I took her the worksheets I hadn't been able to give her then.

"Thank you, Aizawa," she said, kind as ever. "What happened yesterday? I waited for you in the prep room for a while."

"Oh, umm, something suddenly came up. I'm sorry," I told her.

There, you see? I'm the one who screwed up. This time, I was sure of it. After class, I felt good about going to Makino's classroom.

"Makino, do you like Ms. Yukino?"

My mind should have been at ease; I'd been so confident it was just a misunderstanding. But when I stood facing him, that question was the first thing out of my mouth. It caught me off guard.

"Why would you think that?" he asked me, completely mystified, and I could tell I'd just messed up.

"Um, yesterday, I was on my way to the Japanese-language prep room, and…"

"Oh, you heard that?" he asked, like it was nothing. He hardly reacted at all. "I don't have feelings for her or anything. It's just that Yukino makes you curious, you know? She's a total mystery. I haven't done anything yet, but I bet I'll be able to before too long. They say women her age are the sluttiest."

"…Really?"

"Yes, really. Haven't you heard that? Geez, you need to loosen up, Shouko."

Oh, I guess I do, I thought.

"I guess so," I murmured. Maybe I was the one in the wrong. The thought came more and more easily to me as I listened to Makino. After all, he didn't sound the least bit guilty.

After that day, Makino stopped responding to my texts and calls completely. I could only see him if I went to meet him after class. Sometimes we walked back to the station with his friends, too, but it seemed he was avoiding being alone with me. The only exception was sex. He'd hold me at his house when his parents were out, or when I could afford to pay for a hotel, and that was it.

You need to loosen up, Shouko. I was terrified of hearing him say that to me again, so I tried to do everything, no matter what it was. The more I tried, though, the more I'd freeze until I couldn't even get wet. Before long, Makino wouldn't sleep with me anymore.

Summer vacation of my second year of high school was hell.

Makino never responded to me at all. I missed him, so I went to his neighborhood over and over. Even when he spotted me, he just ignored me. It was like I was invisible to him. He was so unaffected by my presence, I started to worry that maybe I really wasn't *there*. Once, just once, he spoke to me in front of his house. "Shouko, come here," he said, as kind as he'd ever been.

Oh, I thought, *yeah, it really was all in my head.* I was so relieved, I could have cried. I might have, in fact.

But Makino took me to a police box. When I heard him tell the officer he was there to report a stalker, I got scared and ran away.

I needed a reason.

What was I doing wrong? What had I done wrong? How could I get him to forgive me? *Could* I earn his forgiveness?

It's Ms. Yukino's fault.

I was eating a convenience store rice ball in our empty living room when it hit me. Why hadn't I seen it before? Ms. Yukino had stolen Makino's affections from me.

As soon as I put the pieces together, I almost melted with relief. I had the answer. I just had to hate Ms. Yukino with the same intensity as my love for Makino.

It's so easy.

The thought made me happier than I'd been in a long time.

* * *

Years later, I would know the truth.

Makino had never thought anything of me at all, and Ms. Yukino was just a kindhearted victim. If today I met Masashi Makino and the Shouko Aizawa I was then, I'm sure I could handle it better. I could draw out what it was they really wanted in a more appropriate way, and show them how to get there. I just didn't know at the time.

…It's a lovely thought, isn't it? I'm sure it would be a relief—both for me and for anybody who might be listening to my story—if I did have that older, wiser perspective. Unfortunately, though, this story isn't over and done with. *It's still happening.*

I already know Makino is a self-centered child, that I'm no different, and that Ms. Yukino isn't responsible for any of this in any way.

"I loved him, I loved him, I loved him, and you—!"

I still have dreams where I'm screaming and crying and hitting Ms. Yukino, again and again.

* * *

I discovered I had a power that startled even me.

I could almost see the traffic signs floating before my eyes, showing me with incredible clarity what I needed to do to effectively ruin Ms. Yukino. I was a little impressed. *I never knew I could do this.*

The first thing I did was be tardy for Ms. Yukino's classes. I'd march in through the door at the front of the classroom thirty minutes after the bell.

"You're late, Aizawa. What's wrong?" the teacher would ask me, but I wouldn't answer. Instead, I'd glare at her.

Then, after a while, I'd just say, "Ask your conscience. You know why" and sit down.

At first, that was all I did, but it was enough for my classmates to sense that there'd been an incident. The whole mood in the classroom changed.

"Hey, Shouko, did something happen with Ms. Yukino?" my friends would ask me during break, but I wouldn't give a straight answer.

"Mm, sorry, it's kinda personal." I made sure not to look them in the eye, and that was all it took to make them seriously worry. After summer vacation, I'd returned to school haggard and skinny, and besides, I'd never been one for mean-spirited gossip. So everyone just assumed that I'd been victimized somehow.

Of course, Ms. Yukino worried about me, too, and she tried to talk to me again and again. I just said “I’m sorry” and avoided saying anything specific.

I kept it up, carefully and tenaciously, for about three months. Then, the girls I was close to began avoiding Ms. Yukino, too. The students trusted her deeply, but the fact that I wouldn’t talk about whatever it was convinced them that she was part of the problem.

Before long, rumors began spreading about something sketchy between Ms. Yukino and Makino. I knew right away that either Makino was still chasing her around, or he’d started the rumors himself out of spite. There had been other, similar rumors before, but they were so dumb, they always fizzled out promptly (usually because “There’s no way Yuki would give that guy the time of day”). This time, though, my silence gave the rumor a certain air of credibility.

Makino’s counting on me for help! I told myself.

By then, I wasn’t even able to talk to him anymore, but the rumor seemed like a gift from him to me. He was telling me we should screw over Ms. Yukino together. Makino and I had to pull this off; I doubled down on my resolution.

“Shouko, did something happen between Makino and Ms. Yukino?” The next time my friends asked, I just teared up. I didn’t even have to act; simply hearing about the whole thing was enough.

“Shouko, are you having a good time at school?”

When my new mom asked me during dinner, I discovered a new angle of attack.

“Hmm… Well, we’re having some trouble in my classics class. Everyone gets so loud, we can’t really have proper lessons. Maybe they’re just messing with the teacher ’cause she’s young, but I’ve got entrance exams next year, you know.”

As we sat around the dinner table, I did my best to get some of the super-expensive-looking meat into my stomach as I explained. This beautiful stranger and I were only about ten years apart. It was like my old mom had been made young again.

Her face lit up at my story, as if she’d finally discovered something she could do for her daughter.

It really was a piece of cake.

Through a complicated series of channels, Mom managed to find her way to the rumor about the relationship between her daughter’s former boyfriend and the problematic classics teacher. By then, Ms. Yukino’s classics lessons for my class had gotten so out of hand that they didn’t really function as education. Several hardworking students had complained to the staff that they weren’t able to study for tests in Ms. Yukino’s class, and at almost the exact same time, some parents submitted a formal complaint to the city’s board of education.

Ms. Yukino was nothing but faithful and good, and she was completely helpless in all this. I had power, and she didn't. Simple, cruel facts.

Before long, Makino graduated, and I lost both my motivation and my reason for bullying Ms. Yukino. But the situation was out of my hands now; it didn't need my help to keep spinning. Like when you stuff the cord of your headphones into your pocket, and the next thing you know, it's all tangled up in impossible knots.

Several students kept harassing Ms. Yukino, and she got sicker and sicker. My idol was now just a depressed, unhealthy middle-aged woman. I found a new boyfriend and dumped him, then got another one and dumped him, and so on and so forth.

Then, one evening during the rainy season, Mom was very pleased to announce that my teacher had decided to leave her position.

I didn't respond. Instead, I silently got up from the dinner table, went to the bathroom, stuck my finger down my throat, and threw up everything that woman had made for me. Tears started falling from my eyes. Without telling a single lie, I'd run Ms. Yukino out of the school.

In June of my third year of high school, I ran into Teshigawara by accident.

A sudden evening shower had driven me under the eaves of Shibuya Station. The air was full of steam, so humid I could almost imagine tiny fish about the size of killifishes swimming in it. Someone else had taken shelter a moment after me, and when I looked to the side, there he was.

"…Hmm? Oh, ohhhhhhhhhhhh! Aizawa, is that you?!" Teshigawara shouted at me, completely soaked.

"Teshigawara…," I murmured, surprised.

He hadn't dyed his hair, and he didn't have a beard. He was as weird and uncool as I remembered, only taller, and his blazer looked terrible. His mouth was wide open in a grin, and he was so overly enthusiastic, I wondered if he was going to jump on me and hug me.

"Aizawaaaaaaaa! Ah, geez, it's been forever! Two years?! How've you been, huh?! Aw, man, you're wearing even more makeup than before!"

The fact that Teshigawara was right there didn't seem real to me somehow, and I couldn't even duck away from his spit. I just stood there, dazed, as if I were in a dream.

"Hmm? Why the long face? Did something happen at home? Or at school? If something's troubling you, you can always talk to me."

I could feel something inside me about to break down. If I suddenly heard what I'd wanted to hear for so long, right now, from Teshigawara, I'd cave. Thanks to the rain, my brightly colored bra was probably showing through my uniform blouse. It was humiliating.

I desperately fought back the impulse to cling to Teshigawara, blinked away any tears, and snapped. "Don't talk to me, creep. Ugh, this is embarrassing."

Without looking at him, I fled through the ticket gate, up the stairs, and into the nearest train, wherever it was going. If I'd talked to Teshigawara

any more, I would have done the same thing to him that Makino had done to me. And I was more afraid of that than anything.

* * *

Summer vacation of my last year of high school ended, and the second term began.

On that day, I didn't leave for school until afternoon. For no particular reason, I boarded the Yamanote Line instead of the usual Ginza Line and went to school the long way. The sun was almost blinding—when someone says *midsummer day*, this is exactly the kind of image that comes to mind. I sat in one of the seats, gazing absently at the puddles of sunlight around the train car. The puddles moved slowly, in sync with the curves of the rails, soaking each person by turns. The moment the light reached my feet, I suddenly remembered my first day of high school.

That day, I'd ridden the Yamanote Line so that Saya and I could go to school together. I remembered how proud I'd felt in my new uniform, and the cheerful conversation we'd had. It could've been yesterday.

What's high school gonna be like? You think everyone's gonna be so much more mature? Will the teachers be mean? I hope the older kids are nice. I wonder if I'll meet somebody I like. I hope I find a nice boyfriend.

I've never seen that first-year boy before, but as soon as he comes into the classroom, I know.

In fact, I knew even before I saw him, the moment I heard his faint footsteps in the corridor. Out of nowhere, I was reminded of that feeling from long, long ago. *I wish somebody would take me away from here.*

I was killing time in the classroom after school with a few of my friends, bitching about our boyfriends and girlfriends and other pointless crap. The bright-red sunset was the kind that comes after the end of a typhoon, and even now that it's below the horizon, the dark-red afterglow is still hanging in the classroom.

When that boy sees us, he pushes the desks out of the way to walk right up to me. His expression is dead serious, and his eyes are resolute. He's here for justice.

Finally, I think. I want to scream at this quiet-looking boy, *What the hell took you so long?!* He's here, but what's the point now?

"What's up, freshmeat?" one of my guy friends asks suspiciously.

The boy ignores him. "Aizawa-senpai…?" he says, walking over in front of me.

"Who're you?" I respond. *Yes, I'm the one you want*, I tell him silently.

The boy sucks in a deep breath, then quietly says, "I hear Ms. Yukino is quitting."

"Huh?"

I'm furious inside. This guy knows nothing. We lost our chance to stop this a long time ago.

"Who cares about that slutty old hag?"

The moment the words are out of my mouth, he slaps me across the face.

This is what I deserve.

Yo no naka no / kurushiki mono ni / arikerashi / koi ni tahezute / shinubeki omoheba

(*Man'yoshu* volume 4:738)

Translation: It seems as though / existence in this world / is pain: / I feel I may die / from the agony of love

Context: One of the two poems Sakanoue no Ooiratsume sent to Ootomo no Yakamochi. It openly expresses the torment her love is causing her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Even Should the Rain Never Fall, a Room Underwater
—Takao Akizuki

The moment his hand connects with the girl's cheek, it leaves a nasty feeling on his palm. It's the unsettling aftertaste of violence, like sticky, dirty water seeping all the way into his bones. *It's still not enough, though*, Takao Akizuki thinks. His heart is pumping out hatred as if it's blood.

"What the hell, man?!"

He hears a voice beside him, and a guy grabs the offending arm. Takao shakes him off but doesn't even glance his way, glaring at the girl instead.

A third-year girl named Aizawa. *This girl did that to* her*.*

Abruptly, he registers someone looming in front of him, then bearing down on him, and the next moment, a heavy shock sends him crashing into a desk. The desk falls over right by his ear with a loud bang, and when he opens his eyes, the floor is in front of his face. It takes a moment for the heat on the inside of his lip to become burning pain.

What? How many of them are in here?

His anger clouded his vision so much, he didn't even see them. The thick taste of blood is flooding his mouth. When Takao lifts his head, a big guy in a T-shirt is looking down at him with a dull expression in his eyes.

Before terror and regret can well up too strongly, Takao swallows them down, along with a loogie of blood. Then, keeping his stance low, he charges the big guy's stomach. It's like body-slamming a heavy log, and right afterward, a hard elbow sinks into his back. He crumples to the floor again and takes two kicks in the gut this time.

He curls up as a stabbing pain spreads through his insides, but somebody grabs his shirt and yanks him to his feet. There's a thick chest inches in front of his face. A guy like a pillar of iron has Takao by the scruff of the neck.

"Dammit!"

Screaming, Takao shoves a fist at his face, but the guy blocks it easily, one-handed. He backhands Takao across the face, then hits him on the chin on the way back. The guy is barely trying, but Takao can feel his jaw moving in ways it shouldn't. As soon as he feels the sole of a shoe against his stomach, he's kicked across the room. Takao's back hits the lockers with a metallic crash so loud, he wonders if he's broken them as his lungs expel a hot mass of air.

What the—? It hurts like hell.

"What's your problem? Whaddaya think you're doing to Shouko?" Mixed into the ringing in his ears, he hears the big guy's contemptuous voice above him.

"Shouko, you don't know this kid, right?" the girl next to Aizawa asks dubiously.

Aizawa doesn't say anything.

What's wrong with me? I'm so weak. The thought makes Takao want to burst into tears, but he manages to sit up.

In front of him, several third-year girls and guys are glaring at him with all the hate they can muster. They're all smirking, too.

"He's one of those guys, right? Another one of Yukino's victims."

"Seriously? You fell for that old bitch, too?"

"Bet she let him go a round."

"Oh yeah, Yuki's a total nympho. God, aren't you grossed out? Do you know how old she is?"

"I feel kinda sorry for him. He's a victim here."

"You might have a chance now. She ain't a teacher no more."

Aizawa abruptly raises her head and looks at Takao, and her blank expression becomes a twisted smile.

"You'd better thank me, kid. I got her out of here for you."

And Takao is blazing with anger right down to his fingertips. With a bellow, he takes a swing at Aizawa, but the big guy blocks his way and hits him again. As the group punches and kicks him, he thinks, *Why?*

Why, why, why?

She*,*

The rain-woman,

Ms. Yukino,

Why didn't she tell me anything—?

* * *

She had my heart in her hands, Takao thinks. The moment I touched her cool foot in that arbor, with the rain and light around us, I was hopelessly captivated.

That day, he'd touched *her* feet, changed their shapes into numbers, traced their outlines with his pencil. As he did, it seemed as if the paper he'd traced them onto had acquired her fragrance, as if he'd caught hold of a fragment of her he'd never expected to find, and that alone had sent heat through every part of him.

But then the rain had stopped after that day, as if to make him pay for that gift. The rainy season was over. Then summer vacation had arrived, and Takao had lost all his excuses for going to the arbor.

One day in early August, his older brother had left their apartment for good. Takao helped him move, starting first thing in the morning. Their mother had run away two months earlier (although she did come home once a week or so to either fix dinner or make Takao fix it, depending on how she was feeling), so for all intents and purposes, he'd started living on his own. He didn't know what to do with the empty half of the traditional room that he'd shared with his brother, and he ate and slept alone in a deserted apartment.

Before he knew it, the blank spaces in the rooms and in between his thoughts had been filled with *her*. Being alone meant knowing that she

wasn't *here*. It was a constant awareness that she was somewhere else, spending time doing things he didn't know about.

For the first time, Takao learned the true meaning of loneliness. Not being able to see her was painful, nearly physically so. I'm sitting here like this, and at this very moment she could be with someone I don't know. Maybe he's listening to her sweet, unsteady voice, and enchanted by her hair ringed by a halo of light, and inhaling her scent that seems to go straight to your heart, and maybe—gently touching her pale-pink toenails.

Before he went to sleep, he prayed for rain, and he was praying for it again before he woke. But no rain fell. *I've been so stubborn and selfish about praying for rain that the gods decided to never let it rain again, out of spite.* Before he knew it, he was seriously believing it, and he was genuinely scared for the future if this kept up.

There was no meaning in this pain; he was only bearing it for his own sake. He still had enough of his wits about him to know that. *Yes, I'm in love. But if it makes me weak, I'll never measure up to the adults around her… So I won't let it make me weak; I'll make these feelings give me strength.* Takao had nearly worn his brain out considering the problem, but he finally formed a resolution. He'd kill the part of his heart complaining that it hurt too much. Then he'd gauge what he could do, how he could reach her, and then he'd get to work.

And so during summer vacation, he devoted as much time as possible to his part-time job. The rain he'd been longing for finally fell, but even on that day, he was at the restaurant in the morning, shaking free of the hold it had on him. Now that Xiao Feng had left the Chinese restaurant, there was plenty of work to be done. He focused on his tasks, thinking only, *How would Shao Hon do this?* He put 70 percent of the money he earned in the bank, saving up to pay for school after he graduated. He was planning to go to a shoe trade school. The remaining 30 percent went into his shoemaking materials fund.

"I can't walk very well anymore," she had said that day.

…So I'm going to make her shoes that will help her want to walk a lot. This may be the one thing I can do to reach her, Takao would tell himself as he worked late into the night after work was done for the day, alone in the apartment.

With the help of the outlines of her feet on that piece of paper, the soft shapes whose sensation still lingered on his hands, he carved wooden lasts and put together a mass of putty, creating molds for the shoes. He drew page after page of shoe designs in his notebook and, after racking his brain, narrowed them down to one. He made a paper pattern. He put it over leather, tracing the outlines with a silver pen. After several mistakes, he cut the shapes out with a leather knife. Assembling the cut pieces of leather like a puzzle, he stitched them together in three dimensions. All the sounds of his work faded into the empty apartment. Like a dry cloth soaking up water, the night air softly held all his sounds.

This deserted apartment is so quiet—but this loneliness is going to make me an adult. Takao's thoughts were almost a prayer.

Summer vacation wasn't long enough to make shoes while working part-time. August was over in a flash, and all he had to show for it was less than ¥150,000 in savings, a mountain of ruined leather, and cuts on his hands. He hadn't even been able to sew the uppers to his satisfaction. At this rate, he had no idea when he'd manage to finish the shoes.

But still, the start of another semester buoyed Takao's feelings. Now, if it rained, he'd be able to go and meet her openly again. I told her I only skip on rainy mornings. What should we talk about, next time we meet? Should I tell her I've almost memorized it? I bet she'll be surprised. "Huh?" she'll ask. "Memorized what?" "The book you gave me," I'll tell her, and maybe I'll actually recite some of it. That'll give her a shock. Maybe it'll make her happy, too.

With all these thoughts in his head, Takao's heart was light as he went to school on the first day of the second term.

So when he passed her in front of the staff room during the lunch recess, Takao didn't realize who she was. Several seconds had passed before he thought, *Huh?*

"Ms. Yukino!"

Even before Takao turned around, Hiromi Satou, his companion, called her name and ran over to her. He turned slowly, following Satou's back with his eyes, and there she was, standing next to his homeroom teacher, Mr. Itou.

…Ms. Yukino?

As he stood there, stunned and bewildered, students were flocking to her. Every one of them was treating her as a teacher.

"I'm sorry, guys."

The moment he heard her voice, a shudder ran through him. *I know that sweet, trembling voice. Why is she here, at school?* Takao was confused.

"I'll be at school until after fifth period, so come talk to me later. I'll have time then."

After she spoke to the students around her, her gaze lowered to the floor, then briefly flicked over to Takao. Their eyes met, and hers were threatening to well up with tears.

It is her.

The joy of seeing her burst up inside him, but it was promptly swept away by something like fury, which was in turn crowded out by bewilderment and questions. It was suddenly hard to breathe, as if a strong wind had sucked away all the oxygen around him.

"Wow, Yuki came to school."

Beside him, Matsumoto's comment sounded terribly far away.

Satou and Matsumoto told him what had happened to Ms. Yukino—to the teacher.

How the girls in her homeroom class had been harassing her ever since the year before. How they'd unfairly blamed her for "stealing" a girl's boyfriend, boycotted her lessons as a group, involved their parents, and bullied her right out of school. How she'd finally decided to quit her job. How the beginning and center of everything had been a girl named Shouko Aizawa.

He was livid. He wasn't sure whether he was angrier at the Aizawa girl, or at Ms. Yukino for not mentioning that she was a teacher, or at himself for his own ignorance.

But for the moment, he kept his raging emotions locked up inside and managed to survive the rest of his classes. At the chime that encouraged students to head home, he looked down silently from a second-floor classroom, watching *her* as she passed through the school gate. As before, several students were trailing after her and crying. The setting sun was a venomous red.

He went straight to the third-year classroom, by himself, found a girl named Aizawa and told her he'd heard Ms. Yukino was quitting. He hadn't thought about what he'd do afterward.

"Who cares about that slutty old hag?"

Before he could think at all, his hand had slapped Aizawa's face.

* * *

Takao realizes that he's made a wrong turn, but he just keeps walking. He's on a residential street with very few streetlights. The lukewarm wind rustles the power lines and the trees along the road. A thin white moon hangs high in the colorless night sky, but when he stares at it, it splits into two or three thanks to a swollen left eyelid. They look almost like nail clippings, and he thinks he can hear the soft, lonely *click, click* sound of *her* cutting her toenails. The fact that he isn't part of that scene, that he never has been part of it and probably never will be, plunges him into inescapable sorrow.

His homeroom teacher came running to the classroom and half dragged him to the hospital. By the time they released him, night had fallen. The Sobu Line was packed with homebound commuters, and when he grabbed the ceiling strap and looked up, the dark window reflected his swollen, gauze-bandaged face. His cheek throbbed and pulsed like a different creature altogether. Saliva that tasted like blood kept pooling in his mouth. Before long, Takao had had enough of the pain and the crowds, and he got off the train after Nakano.

After that, he walked west, following the tracks. He'd be home in an hour or so. Walking on his own two feet, out in the wind, was a better distraction from the pain in his face. From time to time, he spit bloody saliva onto the asphalt.

It felt as if he'd climbed out of the audience into a play when he hadn't even known what it was about. He had no idea what he should do next. He was only now realizing that nobody had wanted him to make an appearance,

and yet he'd acted as if he were the protagonist.—He was so mortified that he wished he could disappear.

When I was still in middle school, she was building relationships I didn't know about with Aizawa and her group. Maybe they ended up causing trouble, but those relationships must have been much deeper than our little encounters. We never made any promises or anything.

I wasn't even a part of her life until three months back, and I was just a passerby who skipped school on rainy days.

Nobody ever asked me to make shoes for them.

She never once said she wanted to see me. She only murmured that we might meet again.

I didn't even imagine what might have happened to her. I really was just thinking about myself.

When he rounds the corner of the residential street, he comes out onto a bridge over the railway tracks. He stands in the middle, calculating his current location. On his left, the distant lights of the skyscrapers of Shinjuku look even larger in the thick darkness. That means he should head into the blackness on his right in order to get home. The tile roofs along the street gleam faintly, as if they're wet. Far above them is *her* thin nail. Gazing at the trailing clouds that drift across it, Takao absently thinks, *I wonder if it'll rain tomorrow.*

The next morning, there's a thin cloud cover.

The sky above Tokyo is a seamless, endless blanket of gray over a very, very quiet morning. *Those clouds are absorbing all the city noise*, Takao thinks as he crosses Koshu-Kaido Avenue, where the colors are even more muted than usual.

When he walks through the park's Shinjuku gate, he remembers he's forgotten his annual pass. Takao sighs a little.

It's not raining, and I don't have my pass.

There's no way she'll be here.

He really shouldn't have come, he knows, but he puts ¥200 into the ticket machine for admission. If he went to school now, he'd be late anyway. *Besides, if it had rained, I might not have come here to begin with… So why exactly am I here?*

Well, whatever. It doesn't matter now. As if he's given up, he sticks his ticket into the automatic gate. The metallic *clank* as the gate opens echoes especially loudly in the deserted park.

Keeping his mind carefully blank, he walks through the park. He doesn't have to think; his feet take the familiar path all on their own. When he passes through the gloomy district of thick Himalayan and Lebanon cedars, the air quickly changes, as it always does. The temperature drops about a degree, and the air is filled with the scents of water and greenery. Small birds cut right in front of him, as if they're making invisible incisions in the air.

Without his umbrella up, the park seems oddly spacious, and the anxiety of a defenseless child is rising within him. More than ever, he senses he's doing something misguided.

For that reason, when the arbor comes into view beyond the maples, Takao is almost relieved to find that no one is there.

No problem. This doesn't hurt at all.

He says the words to himself deliberately, as if he's writing them down on paper.

After all, I knew she wouldn't be coming anymore.

The moment he thinks it, a wave of feelings surges up from his feet all the way to his throat, and he nearly shouts aloud. *No!*

No, that's wrong.

That's not it.

I miss her.

I miss her, I want to see her, and there's nothing I can do about it on my own. I wanted to see her the right way. That's why I stubbornly refused to come here during summer vacation.

The truth is, I don't care if it's raining or not; I don't care whether it's sunny or snowing or cloudy. I just want to see her.

I can't let us end this way.

Suddenly, he hears a small, distant splash.

A fish might have jumped in the pond. Maybe a twig fell into the water. But just maybe. He's sure—

By the time he's passed through the dense, hanging curtain of maple leaves and can see the wisteria trellis, he's already convinced.

Her slim figure is there, in the pale-green shadows under the thick leaves.

At the sound of his footsteps, she slowly turns. She's there, right in front of him, with the pond and its deep-green reflections behind her. She's wearing a form-fitting gray suit, and her expression reminds him of a lost, bewildered child. Softly, she looks at Takao, and her black eyes are so transparent, he can see nearly all the way to her heart. He trembles, as if she's caressed his own heart directly. *She's summer rain personified*, Takao knows. He's sure no one can stop the rain. Somewhere in the distance, thunder rumbles. The words he needs to say find their way to his lips.

The thunder whispers.

Facing *her* under the wisteria trellis, Takao speaks.

"The thunder / whispers. / Yet should rain never fall, / I would stay / at a word from you."

The wind blowing over the pond gently ripples through the wisteria leaves and the water and her hair. She looks down, and her melancholy smile deepens. Out of nowhere, he feels as if he's seen something like this, a very long time ago. After the ripples on the water recede, she looks up at Takao.

"…Yes, that's correct. That's the response to the poem I quoted on the day we met."

She sounds almost like a child mimicking the tones of a teacher. It's just a little funny, and he feels his tension slowly dissolve.

"They're from the *Man'yoshu*, aren't they? I found them in my textbook yesterday."

They were *soumon-ka*, romantic poems sent by a man and woman to each other. *If it rains, will you stay here?* the woman's poem said, and the man's responded, *It doesn't have to rain; I'll stay if you want me to.* He'd heard those poems in class. Takao wants to laugh at himself for taking three whole months to figure it out. Then, summoning his resolve, he says her name.

"Ms. Yukino."

As he says it, he looks straight at her. She's wearing a complicated smile. She tilts her head slightly to one side, gently brushing away the hair that falls over her cheek.

"…A little while after you arrived on that first day, I saw the insignia on your uniform and realized we were from the same school." She pauses for a moment, inhaling slowly. "So I thought if I told you a poem you'd probably learned in class, you might figure out I was a classics teacher. Besides, I thought most of the school knew about me by now… But you never knew at all, did you?"

Takao shakes his head slightly. Her eyes soften, as if she's peering into light. When she speaks, her voice holds a trace of a smile.

"I suspect you were seeing another world entirely."

Suddenly, the clear song of a shrike sounds right next to them. Startled, they look for the source and find two of them flying over the pond, nearly tangled together. The two humans watch them for a while, and when the birds disappear into the shadows of the trees, Yukino sounds worried as she asks, "Hey…what happened to your face?"

What should he tell her? He starts wanting to make her worry.

"I was drinking beer like you, Ms. Yukino, and I got drunk and fell off the Yamanote Line platform."

"You didn't!" She puts a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide.

She's cute. Takao grins at her. "No, I didn't. I just got in a fight."

Just then, it happens. The sky flashes pure white, and there's a clap of thunder.

The air trembles like the diaphragm on a speaker.

Lightning has struck, and it's close. The two of them look at each other, then up at the sky. The blanket has billowed up into cumulonimbus clouds like gray clay, and streaks of light flicker deep within like blood vessels. A low rumble slowly rolls around above the clouds like a drum. Cold wind suddenly whips the surface of the water into waves, and several large drops fall, splashing loudly. *Oh, it's going to rain.* By the time the words reach his mind, the downpour has already turned their surroundings misty white.

The leaves of the wisteria trellis are absolutely useless as a roof, and Takao catches Yukino's hand and takes off running before he can even think. It feels like sprinting through white, cloudy water. He can't see what's ahead of him, and he can't even hear the sound of his own feet over the roar of the downpour. By the time they run into the arbor, their hair and clothes are drenched.

"We look like we swam across a river," Yukino says. She's panting, but she sounds like she's having fun. Takao laughs, too. Somewhere along the way, his heart has grown as exhilarated as his breath. The rain is falling sideways, carrying leaves with it; they give a cheer when it buffets them. The clean, vivid smell of rain surrounds them, and it feels as if all the air in the world has been replaced. The next thing he knows, the rain has washed away their earlier conversation and feelings. The events at school and the loneliness of summer vacation are completely gone.

"I love summer downpours," Yukino says happily, watching the rain streaming from the eaves like a waterfall.

"Me too. Summer is my favorite season."

"Even the really hot ones?"

"Those too. It makes me feel so alive—the humidity, the sweat, the thirst. I love it. What about you, Ms. Yukino?"

"I like summer, too. Summer, and then spring. They're the seasons when new things begin and grow. I hate the cold seasons, because I get chilly."

What a reason! Takao is amused.

"But your name means 'snow field,' and you still—"

"Hate winter, yes." Yukino laughs, finishing the sentence. Then she touches the ends of her wet hair with her fingers and glances at Takao, somewhat apologetically. Her plump lips twitch a little, as if she's started to say something to herself, then decided against it.

"What?"

"Um…" Yukino hesitates, then speaks with some determination. "What's your name…?"

Takao cracks up; he can't help it. A warm emotion fills his chest. "It's Akizuki. Takao Akizuki."

"Hmm. Akizuki," Yukino murmurs, testing the sound. "Akizuki, hmm?" she says one more time. Abruptly, triumphant realization appears on her face.

"But your name means 'autumn moon'—!"

She's like a kid, isn't she, he thinks, but he answers her.

"But I like summer, yeah."

They pause for a breath, and then they both giggle. It feels like one more secret for just the two of them, and a feeling of ticklish delight settles over the arbor.

Neither of them consciously makes the first move, but they take their usual spots on the L-shaped bench after that, with about enough space for

two people between them. Somewhere along the way, the places where they sit have gotten a little closer than they were three months ago.

The temperature is falling. The gusts of wind have subsided, but the heavy rain brings air down from a very high altitude. An abruptly autumnal chill blows into the arbor, carrying a fine spray with it.

Yukino is sitting hunched over on the bench, hugging her own shoulders. *Is she cold?* Takao worries. Her wet hair hides her profile, and water drips from its ends. Her wet trousers forlornly trace the contours of her round hips. Behind her, a colony of yellow flowers at the edge of the pond is shivering violently under the pounding rain. The heavy scent of the flowers and water mingles with Yukino's faint, sweet fragrance beneath the dark arbor. Her sky-gray suit seems specially tailored to match the gloom in the arbor. Wet with the rain, Yukino looks perfectly at home here.

The sight speaks straight to his soul.

When he looks at Yukino, Takao suddenly finds it hard to breathe. His heart jumps and pounds, and the sound of the rain recedes into someplace far away. His face and the core of his body are growing hotter, and he can't stop it. Slowly, Takao tears his eyes away from her.

Suddenly, he sneezes. *But I don't feel cold at all*, he thinks, vaguely embarrassed. When he looks up, Yukino is watching him. Slowly, almost as if she's smelling a flower, Yukino smiles kindly and says in a gentle voice, "If we stay like this, we'll catch cold."

As they hurry out of the park, the force of the rain gradually lessens, and the warmth of September returns to the air. They go under the elevated Chuo Line, pass Sendagaya Station and come out onto Gaien Nishi-dori, then turn into a narrow street, and there's Yukino's condominium.

The high-ceilinged lobby of the old building has a nostalgic scent, like something he smelled at a relative's house when he was very small. The scent of old air. The elevator is undergoing a maintenance inspection, so they take the stairs up to her apartment on the eighth floor. He's out of breath, but as he follows Yukino up the narrow stairway, her fragrance surrounds him, and he's delighted to find he can breathe it in as deeply as he wants.

As soon as they enter her apartment, Yukino tells him to go shower and gives him a relaxed silk V-neck shirt and a pair of sweatpants to change into. Then Yukino takes her shower.

When she emerges, she's wearing well-worn madder-red jeans, a cream-colored tank top, and a pale-pink bolero jacket. She smells faintly of soap, and she's barefoot. His ears burning, Takao secretly follows the patter of her feet on the flooring.

Yukino puts Takao's wet shirt in the washing machine, blots the excess moisture from his uniform trousers with a towel, and irons both items for him. While she does that, Takao borrows the kitchen and makes lunch.

He's a little disappointed that the only prominent item in the refrigerator is beer, but there are onions and carrots and lettuce and things in the

vegetable drawer, and as long as he cuts away the brown, discolored bits, everything seems edible. She has eggs as well, so he decides to make rice omelets. Instead of meat, he opens a can of tuna, using it to replace chicken in the rice. He finds a jar of pickled olives in among the spices (she must have bought them to go with her beer), so he cuts them into slices and mixes them with the lettuce, making side salads. There's only about a teaspoon left in the bottom of the bottle of salad dressing, so he whips up something new from vinegar and pepper and olive oil. The room is filled with the smells and steam of cooking and ironing. *This is what "family" smells like*, Takao thinks, content.

"Yum! I love ketchup!"

"High praise for my rice omelets." Takao smirks.

The two of them sit facing each other across a small table.

"Be careful, there might be some eggshell in it."

Yukino blinks, briefly puzzled by his remark, then gasps as she puts two and two together.

"Oh, come on!" She laughs. "Are you still holding a grudge about my rolled omelet?"

"Ha-ha-ha. I'll never be able to forget it."

"It wasn't very good, was it?"

"Not very"? Takao finds the word choice amusing.

"'Not good' isn't quite the, uh…" He glances at Yukino, laughing. "It was bad. Horrible. To be honest."

"I can live with that. Cooking has never been my specialty anyway," Yukino primly retorts, but then she smoothly shifts into a smile and takes a bite of omelet rice. She gets a little bit of ketchup on her lip, and she licks it off lovingly.

"What else do you like, besides ketchup?" Takao asks.

"Hmm…" Yukino thinks for a little. "I like the taste of Worcestershire sauce better than soy sauce. And consommé."

"…You sound a little like a high school guy."

"Heh-heh, speaking from experience?"

"Hey, do you know how consommé soup is made?" Takao asks, eating salad.

"Huh? Is it…from wheat? Wait, no. Barley?"

"It wells up from the ground. There's a big pond of it somewhere in northern France. It's supposed to be this really pretty, clear amber color."

Yukino looks mystified.

"There are fish in it, too. They're called *consommé poisson*."

"…You're pulling my leg, right?"

"Obviously. Are you really a teacher, Yukino?"

"Th-that's so mean!" He can actually see Yukino flushing bright red, all the way down her slim neck. Curling her fingers into a fist, she pounds on the table. "Akizuki, that is unkind! You shouldn't do that! You really shouldn't!"

Her earnest protest is so funny, Takao laughs out loud.

They've cleared the dishes away, and now the warm aroma of coffee is drifting in the room. There's a green curtain over the big patio door, and it gives the room a faint green tint.

It's like this room is underwater, Takao thinks as he drinks the coffee Yukino has made him.

He's sitting on the floor by the patio door, and when he looks up, Yukino is in the kitchen pouring a cup for herself. All he can see is her back, but he can tell very clearly that she's smiling, too. The sad, gentle patter of her bare feet against the floor, the noise of the coffee dripping, and the friendly clicks and clinks of the ceramic cups sound strangely close to him, as if he's hearing them underwater. He's surrounded by the sounds of Yukino and the rain. Right now, in this moment, the unfair jealousy and hopeless impatience and even the membrane of nebulous anxiety that's clung to him for the past few years have vanished completely.

This just might be—

It occurs to Takao very suddenly. The feeling has drifted up from the very deepest part of his heart, and he's careful to put it into words in his mind so that it won't crumble away.

Right here, right now…

I might be the happiest I've ever been.

Narukami no / shimashi toyomoshi / furazutomo / ware ha todomaramu / imo shi todomeba

(*Man'yoshu* volume 11:2514)

Translation: The thunder / whispers. / Yet should rain never fall, / I would stay / at a word from you.

Context: A poem from a man to the woman who tried to use the rain as an excuse to keep him there with her. He tells her that, if it's what she wants, he'll stay. This is the response to the woman's poem in chapter 2.

CHAPTER NINE

Indescribable.
—Yukari Yukino and Takao Akizuki

Right here, right now, I might be the happiest I've ever been.

Yukino can feel it.

But she knows this happiness won't last much longer. It will end, and it will end soon. She realized it while she was taking her shower, as if the hot water had opened her eyes. But this moment of bliss isn't over yet. She's warm and cozy, right down to her toes; her lips are happy and cheerful. Gently, she pours hot water over the coffee grounds. As they swell, air bubbles whisper, and a fragrant aroma rises. The *drip-drip* into the transparent carafe mingles with the sound of the rain. *Gods, please*, Yukino prays. *Let this time with Akizuki last just a little longer. Don't let our rain stop just yet.*

"Yukino," he says behind her.

She turns around, a smile still on her lips. He's smiling, too, watching her.

"Yukino, I—" he says.

Oh. It's already time.

"—I think I love you."

He's watching Yukino steadily as he speaks. She can tell very clearly that he hadn't been planning to divulge his feelings until this very moment. It just slipped out, beyond his control. *That's not fair. I…*

It feels as if she were watching herself from a distance; Yukino is aware her cheeks are growing warmer and warmer. *I'm happy. Everything in me is buzzing with delight. But…*

But I can see that happy version of myself in the distance. I'm reaching out to her, and I don't know if I'll reach her in time. I need to pull her back to my side; I have to make her say the right thing. No matter what. I set my coffee cup down on the counter and finally let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding. I worry that it sounded scornful, and I start wanting to make excuses: No, that's not what I meant. But for now, I have to say the right thing. I have to reprimand him gently, the way a teacher should.

"—Ms. Yukino. Remember?"

When he hears my reply, his lips part slightly, as if he wants to say something, but he gives up and lowers his head. I can sense that he's more surprised than disappointed. Like when you cheerfully take someone's hand and they shake you off. My heart stings. I pick up my coffee cup and walk over to him. When I sit down on the chair, it gives a little creak. He's sitting on the floor, and I look down at him as I speak.

"I'm sure you've heard I left my job at the school."

He doesn't respond. I keep going.

“I’ll be moving next week. I’m going back to live with my parents on Shikoku.”

He stays silent, but he looks up at me as if he’s asking what I really mean. I lower my head instead and make excuses.

“I made the decision ages ago. Here’s the thing about that arbor—”

An image of the empty arbor rises behind my eyelids. It’s wet, darkened by the rain, and as miserable as an old man abandoned by his wife of many years.

“I was practicing walking on my own. I was practicing alone…”

Finish your thought, Yukino tells herself, as if she were scolding a small child. *Tell him you don’t need him.* She clenches her toes.

“—Without shoes.”

Like a stone dropped into a deep hole, it takes a long time for those words to reach him. There’s the sense of a soft click, as if the stone has struck bottom, and then…

“…So?” he says in a voice devoid of emotion. His gaze is so straightforward that it frightens her.

“So…” Yukino averts her eyes slightly. “Thank you for everything, Akizuki.”

Silence falls. As if to fill it, the sound of the rain swells again. The row of potted plants on the balcony are filled with clear water, and they look almost like miniature aquariums. Before long, he quietly gets to his feet. The sound of rustling fabric seems especially loud. As he speaks, he looks down at Yukino.

“Um, thank you for these clothes.” He starts toward the washroom. “I’ll go change.”

“But they aren’t dry yet…!” In spite of herself, she calls after his receding back. *No, don’t. It’s better this way.* Yukino tears her eyes away from him and looks down at the coffee cup in her hands. She hears a soft click as he shuts the bathroom door.

She hasn’t even started on her coffee yet, and she brings the cup to her lips. The steam rises gently, dampening her eyelashes slightly. She tries to drink, but the cup feels so heavy, she sets it down on the table instead. A mass of spiny emotions is bumbling around inside her like a hedgehog. It’s a little like regret, and a little like guilt, full of prickling pain and wordless accusations.

Then what should I have done?! Yukino is about to burst into tears. I was never given a choice. I’ve always, always tried to be sincere with everybody; I just wanted to be a kind, gentle adult like Ms. Hinako. Whenever anybody wanted anything from me, I’ve always done whatever I could. Gazing at the gradually thinning steam from her coffee, Yukino thinks. I wanted to stop being on the outside of the world looking in. I wanted to be part of it. And the closer I got to being a grown-up, the more possible it seemed. I started believing I might be able to live like everybody else. And then the next thing I knew, I was in the middle of all this; it was as unavoidable as the rain. Mr.

Itou came along, and Makino, and then Aizawa, until everything was all screwed up, and then, after I fought so hard to find a roof that would shelter me from the rain, along came Akizuki. Everyone made me so uncertain. I wanted them to leave me in peace. It was all I could do just to stand on my own—it took all I had not to spend every day curled up in a little ball.

Slowly, footsteps approach her, and she raises her head. He's standing in the pale blue-green shadows, wearing a uniform that must still be damp.

"—Um, I…I'm going home. Thank you for everything," he nearly whispers, bowing deeply. Then, without waiting for Yukino's response, he starts toward the front door.

"Oh!"

In spite of herself, Yukino stands up. *Wait. Don't go yet. You don't have an umbrella, do you? Why not wait until the rain stops?—No, no, I can't afford to say it.* Silently, Yukino lowers herself to the chair once again. His footsteps recede. She listens to him put on his shoes, then pull down the door handle. And then…

Ptunk.

The door falls shut behind him.

It makes her furious.

"—Stupid, *stupid*!"

Shouting, she grabs the chair and swings it high, ready to throw it at something. But she's glaring into empty space now; no one's there. Deflated, she shakily lowers the chair again and sits back down on it.

"Stupid." She murmurs it again softly. "Akizuki, you're an idiot."

How dare you act like I dumped you? Like you're the innocent victim here? You have no idea how I felt all those days alone in the arbor during summer vacation. I'm sure your first summer vacation of high school was full of fun. You eat dinner with your family every night, and I'm sure you go out for tea with girls in your grade. You're completely incapable of understanding anything at all about the life of a woman who's twelve years older than you, and you're just—!

The inside of her nose prickles. Hot breath catches in her throat; her chest constricts; her eyes well with tears. She presses her palms tightly against her eyes to stop the rising flood, and a flickering pattern like a delicate white maze dances across the insides of her damp eyelids. On the table, her untouched coffee is silently continuing to cool.

You're the one who ended this, you know, Yukino thinks, almost hatefully. You really are still a child. If you'd just kept your mouth shut, maybe we could've eaten together again. Maybe we could've traded contact information, and maybe you could've come to say good-bye on the day I left for home. We could have quietly closed the door on this relationship in peace, without all this pain.

I held my ground.

I didn't say it.

I didn't tell you I loved you.

…But I finally let myself think it.
Slowly, Yukino raises her face from her hands. I was always careful to keep those words from my mind, but now—

It's the push she needs, and she breaks into a run.

She slams the front door open with her shoulder and flies out into the corridor. She dashes right by the elevator, with its CLOSED FOR MAINTENANCE sign, and opens the emergency door. Outside, the gray downpour has grown even heavier. She runs down the narrow stairway attached to the outer wall. Rain blows in incessantly, and Yukino splashes through the puddles on the urethane rubber stairs. Her toes slip in the water, and she falls down a short flight of steps. She puts her hands out, catching herself on the landing, but her cheek scuffs hard against the floor. The front of her outfit is sopping wet again. But Yukino doesn't register the pain or the cold; she gets up and starts running again, then stops.

He's there, one landing below hers. He's resting both elbows on the chest-high wall, looking out over the misty, hazy town. A whisper of thunder echoes very near the two of them, as if it found its way here from some distant sky.

The thunder whispers—

The words surface in her mind, but she's unable to think of any others.

As if he's heard her anyway, he slowly turns around.

I never even dreamed that Yukino would come after me.

Or maybe I was hoping she would, and that's why I was waiting here. I don't really know.

"Um…," she quietly begins as she slowly descends the stairs.

Takao doesn't want to hear any of it. "Forget what I said back there, okay, Yukino?"

He manages to say the words naturally and decisively, as if he's practiced. He meets her eyes and says what he feels he has to say—what he ought to say, for her sake.

"I actually hate you after all."

Raindrops blow in, striking his cheek. Yukino's eyes scrunch up a bit with grief. *How dare you? After everything that's happened, now you're acting all upset? Damn you*, Takao thinks, and he means it.

"Even from the beginning…I never really liked you. I mean, you were drinking beer in the park first thing in the morning, quoting random poems at people…"

All the emotions this rain-woman has made him feel—all the bewilderment and frustration and jealousy, the adoration and wishes and prayers and hope and despair—little by little turn into anger. It's getting harder to stop talking.

"You never said anything about yourself; you just kept asking about me. You *knew* I was a student, right? You liar!"

I hate her. I hate her. Look at her acting like I hurt her and now she's about to break down—damn her!

“If I’d known you were a teacher, I would’ve kept my mouth shut about the shoes. You were sitting there thinking I could never make it happen, weren’t you? Why didn’t you just say it?! Did you think you had to just smile and nod at the stupid dream of a stupid kid?”

And only a stupid kid would stand here yelling at you this way. I hate it!

“The whole time, you knew it was just a fantasy! Everything—all of it! You knew I’d never be enough!”

I’m crying like a loser in front of a woman—I hate this. All this time, I’ve been trying to grow up, and now you’re making me feel this way. Damn you!

“So just say it! Pat me on the head and tell the little kid to run along to school! Tell me you hate me!”

If you don’t, I’ll end up loving you my whole life. I love you, I love you, I love you, and even now, I’m falling deeper moment by moment.

“You—!”

Stop it, stop it! Why are you crying?

“You’ll just look the other way forever—”

Tears are trickling down Akizuki’s face.

He’s screaming.

“—and live your life alone!”

My breath catches.

I can’t take it any longer.

Barefooted, I break into a run.

She pulls me into a tight hug,

her sweet scent sends my heart spinning,

and she bursts out in a loud cry.

The sound of her tears falling like heavy rain makes my breath catch in my throat.

Yukino’s body is trembling against me, and she buries her face in my shoulder. She pushes her cold nose against my neck, sobbing like a child. I’m too stunned to lift a finger.

“Every…morning…”

I can hear strangled words among her sobs.

Every morning.

Under Yukino’s damp breath, my right shoulder is so hot it feels like it’s on fire.

“Every morning…! I tried to do it right—I put on my suit…and…tried to go to school…!”

The heat from my shoulder is spreading into the rest of me, and tears keep oozing from my eyes as if that heat had melted ice hidden somewhere inside me.

“But I was too scared… It was too much…”

In my blurred vision, something sparkles and shines.

It’s the rain.

The rain around us is glittering in the evening sun.

“Back there,” she says, sobbing. Her sweet, tearful voice speaks right by my ear.

“Back there, you—…”

I want Yukino to stop crying, want to stop crying myself, and I hug her tightly to hold back the tears. I press her petite head against my neck with all the strength I’ve got. I want to break her, to protect her, to cherish her as my heart is ready to shatter and there’s nothing I can do.

As if the force of our embrace has pushed all the air from her lungs, Yukino cries out:

“You saved me!”

And Yukino bursts into sobs.

And Akizuki bursts into sobs.

Words can’t express any of it, and they cling to each other for warmth in a frigid world.

Between the wet buildings, beneath the setting sun to the west, lie a green park and a cluster of skyscrapers like distant peaks.

Like flames in the wind, for a moment, the gilded rain flares brighter.

Natsu no no no / shigezumi ni sakeru / himeyuri no / shiraenu koi ha / kurushiki monoso

(*Man'yoshu* volume 8:1500)

Translation: Like a star lily / blooming in the undergrowth / of a summer field, / unseen and unanswered / secret love is painful indeed

Context: A poem by Sakanoue no Iratsume. It compares the pain of a secret love to a single deep-red flower blooming in a meadow covered with green leaves as far as the eye can see.

CHAPTER TEN

Adult Speed I Can't Keep Up With, My Son's Lover, the World That Refuses to Fade.
—Reimi Akizuki

It’s such a pleasant morning that I decide to take a different route for a change.

When I twist the steering wheel, the sun swings around from behind me to the right-hand window. The low morning light slowly flows up my body, gently warming my right side to remind me that spring’s finally here.

It was a really cold winter. In February, even Tokyo got heavy snowfall. I kept my winter tires on the whole time, and obstinate blankets of snow lingered in the shade, getting blacker and dirtier. But when March came around and the Kanto area left the long tunnel of rain, the air prickling against your skin softened, and the pale green of grass and trees slowly began to color the landscape. “Long spring rains” strikes me as a very apt phrase.

I set a finger on the switch, opening the driver’s side window a crack. The smell of spring promptly blows into the car. It’s a special chill unique to this season, suffused with that sense of something new on the horizon. The emotions of those times—the excitement and sorrow and romance and anxiety and anticipation of entrance ceremonies and graduations—rise inside me again all at once. Even after I’ve attended so many school events for my two sons, the scent of spring carries to me my own adolescence.

Excitement is bubbling up inside me, and Eeeeek, I have to buy something new for spring and go to the salon and mixers and dates and out to explore and drink! My head is full of prospects and desires.

The traffic light in front of me turns red, and I slowly step on the brake, lecturing myself: *No, no, you’re not as young as you used to be.* No more mixers anyway. I take a deep breath. Breathe in, breathe out. God, the weather’s beautiful. Leaning over the steering wheel, I look up.

The sky is the color of blue ink dissolved in plenty of water, pale and transparent, and the first scattered cherry blossoms are closer to white than pink. The young leaves that have just begun to bud on the miscellaneous trees are the pale green of the first stroke of a careful painter.

Oh, I see.

And then it hits me. Those shoes my son showed me were meant for a spring day like this one. They were shoes for someone who was beginning to walk in a new place on a promising spring morning.

I wonder what she’s like. Shifting my right foot to the accelerator, I consider the question with a little grin. What kind of girl has he fallen madly, probably hopelessly in love with? What kind of girl made him want to give her spring shoes?

* * *

“Don’t think of me as your son,” my son said.

It was a snowy night, so it must have been nearly two months ago. I'd come home late, eaten the dinner he'd made, and taken a bath, and I was sitting at the kitchen table for a tiny drink before going to bed. It was already past one in the morning.

"Hmm?" I looked at him. He was deadly serious.

"I want an outside opinion. Could you take a look at these?"

With that, my son set a pair of women's shoes on the table. They smelled ever so faintly of leather and glue.

"My, those are lovely!" I said, and I meant it.

They were rather small pumps, with heels about two and a half inches tall. The toes were pastel pink, the bodies were a flesh color so pale, it was nearly white, and the heels were lemon yellow, as if they'd been exposed to the sun. They had long straps that would wind around the ankles, with little leaf shapes made of apple-green leather sewn to the tips. The color scheme was pale and unreliable, and the shoes themselves were so delicate, they looked as if they might dissolve into thin air and vanish if they were left here overnight.

"…You made these?"

I couldn't imagine them sitting on display in a mass retail store. And if they had, they would probably have gotten eclipsed by other, gaudier shoes. These were clearly shoes for *someone*.

"Yeah, but…I don't want that to bias you. I want to know what *you* think of them, as a woman."

My son said it again. His face was red, and he was staring at the floor. He sounded so serious, I was afraid he might break down in tears. My heart ached; he had worked on these for dear life.

"Let's see…" I picked up one of the shoes. It was as light as it looked. The feel of the soft, velvety leather made me think of a small newborn animal with a rapid heartbeat. I tilted it at different angles, closed my hand around the heel, touched the stitches in the leather. These were probably the first women's shoes he'd managed to finish. *What should I tell him…?*

"They're a little small for me, and I really doubt I could wear them, but I like the design. They aren't showy, but they still have a presence. If these were on display at a studio I liked, they'd catch my eye," I said, then looked at my son.

There was so much urgency in his eyes as he waited for me to continue, I worried he might blow up. *T-talk about pressure. You're my kid, but this is hard.*

"For the work of a high school hobbyist, I think they're very well done. And I'm not just saying that because I'm your mother."

"And if they weren't?" he asked, as if he was bracing himself. *Here we go*, I thought, giving up. *What you want to hear is the next part, isn't it? This is my job as your mom.*

“—Let’s see. I don’t think you could sell them, and actually walking in them would be a little hard. They might only last a few days before they broke. Although I can’t say for sure.”

My son’s lips parted as if he wanted to say something, then closed again. As he waited, his eyes were almost teary. *Sheesh, relax! No need to worry so much about everything*, I think, and go on.

“The leather is wrinkled, and there are lots of fine scratches, but that’s part of the charm of handmade things. As long as you aren’t selling them, I mean. But—okay, look here. When you look at them from the back, the heels are attached so that they don’t quite mirror each other.”

I turned the heels to face my son.

“The way they bear her weight will differ between one side and the other, and the more she uses them, the more I think the heels will lean. I also think the middle of the insole is probably too soft.”

“The shank?”

“Yes, is that what it’s called? A shank?”

As I spoke, I put a finger into the shoe and pressed down hard on the instep. The whole thing warped.

“You see? It’s probably going to bend whenever she takes a step. So…”

“So they really aren’t practical.” He finished my sentence wearily.

“Probably not,” I admitted.

My son gave a little laugh.

“If you’re already catching all that, Mom, a pro would probably demolish them. I guess studying by myself really isn’t going to cut it.”

He looked relieved. He’s good at letting go and moving on; it’s one of the great things about him. I was relieved, too.

“Man, I’d say a sixteen-year-old boy who taught himself how to make high heels is plenty weird.”

“Ha-ha.” He gave a brief laugh. “Thanks for the feedback. That was really helpful. You’re having a nightcap, right, Mom? Want me to make you some snacks?”

“Yaaay! Thanks, Takao.”

Ahh, yes. Home is so sweet, I thought, gazing at Takao’s back as he opened a can in the kitchen. At my younger lover’s house, where I’d lived until the end of the previous year, all the cooking had been my job, without exception. Shouta, my oldest son, and I had fought constantly. He’d moved out, and I’d returned after several months away and was living here with Takao. Now that it was just the two of us, though, our days were very peaceful and pleasant. The cleaning and laundry had gradually turned into Takao’s jobs, too, after I ran away. *Ahh, it’s so nice here. I’m glad I had a second kid.*

“…What?”

Sensing my eyes on him, Takao turned around.

“Ohh, I was just thinking I was glad I made you.”

“Don’t say it like that. Here.”

Turning red, he *thunk*ed a small bowl down on the table in front of me, a little roughly. Male virgins are so cute when you tease them (and I'm pretty sure he is one). The bowl held a row of canned sardines and shredded pickled plums rolled up in green shiso leaves.

"So who are you giving those to?" I asked Takao, starting on my second glass of shochu.

"What?" Takao looked up from his tea.

"You know. Who are the shoes for? Your girlfriend?"

"Wha…"

This kid turns red at the drop of a hat.

"I—I don't have a girlfriend," Takao protested hastily.

"Whoa, then you're telling me you made shoes for a crush?"

Whoops, too much pressure. Oh, virgins. And teenage boys in love.

Takao looked down sullenly; he seemed cross. *Oh, other people's romances are so much fun.* I took a gulp of shochu, then reached for the snacks with my chopsticks. *Damn, why do pickled plums and shiso go together so well?*

"So, this girl. I bet she's older than you, isn't she?" I pointed at him with my chopsticks, grinning, and Takao flinched and looked at me.

"Those shoes aren't for a high schooler. C'mon, where did you meet her? Is she in college? How much older is she?"

Takao turned beet red, scratched at his earlobe, slurped his tea, and refused to look at me as he started rambling.

"Uh, umm, I'm pretty sure she's eighteen or nineteen, so two or three years, maybe?"

Liar. I could sense it from the way he was acting. She might be a working adult, maybe even a decade or so older than he was. Poor thing. *I don't think that one's gonna work out, kiddo.* I was getting a real kick out of this.

"Hmm. You wanna drink a bit?"

"No way! I'm going to bed."

Aw, he got away. Man, Takao's all grown up now, too, I thought as I drank by myself that evening, indulging in the emotions of that little revelation. Takao hasn't mentioned shoes since then.

* * *

"Listen, I told you yesterday: Counter services are only available until five o'clock. Remember?"

I can hear Kobayashi's shrill voice. A female student says something in protest. Kobayashi yells, "I told you, no means no!" and then there's a *swish* as she closes the reception window curtain. Smacking the switch to turn off the fluorescent lights behind the counter, she marches back over to the desk beside mine in her blue tiered skirt.

"What was that?"

I've been making up a list of items to order from the bookstore, but I pause to ask her my question. Her shapely eyebrows draw together in annoyance as she answers.

"She just brought the tuition for last term's classes. Now."

"For last term? But the payment deadline was a full month ago."

"Yes, and we've sent her two reminders. *And* she brought cash, even though we told her over and over that she had to transfer it into the bank account! And the revenue division's already closed anyway."

She starts getting ready to go home, moving as if she's not sure what to do with her pent-up anger. I choose not to point out that we've still got thirty minutes before it's really time to leave.

"Hey, could I see her file?" Without waiting for her response, I take a peek at her computer. "Which one is she?"

She looks annoyed, but she points her out anyway. "This one, Momoka Nakajima."

Scanning the rows of figures, I yelp, "Wait, wait, today's her final deadline!" I rush out of the office and run after the girl walking down the corridor. "Ms. Nakajima!"

Momoka Nakajima turns around, and I catch a strong whiff of vanilla perfume.

"What?"

"Listen, if you don't pay your tuition today, they're going to take you off the register!"

"Huh?" Momoka Nakajima just sounds grumpy, as if she doesn't understand the gravity of the situation, and I take her back to the office and explain. At a university, if you don't pay your tuition, you get taken off the register—and that basically means you're fired. The payment period technically ended a month ago, and the grace period was over today, and she was supposed to deposit the required amount in the bank by three this afternoon. All of which meant that bringing cash after five wasn't going to cut it.

Momoka Nakajima, who has a sweet face and is wearing light, perfectly applied makeup, angrily asks me what she's supposed to do now.

Listen, if you had time to do all that makeup, you must have had time to go to the bank. But I just tell her that given the circumstances, we'll accept her payment in cash, just this once. I take the envelope she holds out to me and count the bills, thinking up an excuse to give to the finance department as I work. *…Huh?* I recount them three times.

"…You're short by twenty thousand yen."

"Seriously? What am I going to do? That's all I have today…" Momoka Nakajima turns her damsel-in-distress makeup job toward me and glances at the nametag that's hanging from my neck. "Ms. Akizuki, could you pay it for me for now? I'll totally pay you back tomorrow—er, next week!"

I fight back the sudden urge to throw the envelope at her, and after about five minutes of discussion, in exchange for her parents' address and phone number, I take ¥20,000 out of my wallet.

"That was ridiculous," Kobayashi says, after I've sent Momoka Nakajima on her way and returned to my desk. "If she gets taken off the register, it's her own fault. She's not a child anymore; I don't think there's any need for us to go that far for her."

"…Kobayashi, had you noticed?"

"Huh?"

"That today was her final deadline."

Kobayashi doesn't answer the question and snaps back, "That was a chance for her to learn how society works. It would've done her more good in the end."

"I don't think that's true," I say. I'm gazing at Kobayashi's prettily decorated fingernails. She's an attractive new graduate, and to me, she looks as if she could be Momoka Nakajima's classmate.

"I don't think universities are like the customer service window at city hall or a bank. Of course the school is a corporation as well, but it's an educational institution first and foremost. University employees are just like the faculty: We earn our pay for doing things that support students' growth and help them graduate into society. We need to be on the students' side, not the administration's."

"So we should spoil them, is what you're saying."

Rolling her eyes, Kobayashi grabs her bag—a little designer number with a yellow monogram pattern—and starts for the door without even saying good-bye. I want to lob a pencil at her back, but I manage to control myself.

"You should've thrown that pencil." Shimizu laughs. He takes a drink of his oolong tea.

"Well, I couldn't do that. I gotta work with her."

The restaurant's cramped interior is filled with noise and the smoke from grilling meat.

"I'm still mad, though. Kids these days are so eager to punish other people—they don't let anything slide for anyone except themselves. They don't even think about how many times others have forgiven them, and yet they demand morals and ethics and their particular brand of common sense from others. They're proud, but they're starving for validation, and yet they don't want to recognize the value in other people."

After my rant, I gulp down a swig of beer. "You've been holding that in for a while," Shimizu comments cheerfully. "I think I see where the Kobayashi girl is coming from, too, though."

I glare at him, but he just gives me a conciliatory smile and elaborates.

"Students these days are full of themselves, you know? They think of themselves as customers. Doesn't it make you want to teach them a lesson?"

“No. Nobody has the right to *teach other people a lesson*,” I retort, leaning over the table for emphasis, just as a platter of meat arrives.

“Well, never mind, Reimi. I’ll grill you some Korean-style spareribs.”

Shimizu’s bony hands busily line up spareribs on the grill. That alone is enough to melt my irritation away.

“Hey, Reimi, the tripe is incredible.”

“This skirt steak is actually edible, Shimizu.”

“We’re still okay on rice, aren’t we? Let’s get some Korean lettuce.”

Watching Shimizu stuff his face with meat makes me feel as if I’m watching a child eat. *Yes, that’s right, eat up.* Technically, at thirty-six, he’s already in middle age, but he seems like a student. Partly because he’s always in street clothes. He’s a thin man with short-cropped hair and plastic-framed glasses. He sometimes looks even more like a kid than my oldest, Shouta, who’s twenty-seven this year.

“By the way, Reimi, is there a reason you took a job at a university?”

As I answer, I wrap some meat in a lettuce leaf for Shimizu. “Well, I told you I had my oldest when I was in college, remember? I took about a year off from school around when he was born. After that, I went back to school while I raised him, and I graduated, and when I was looking around for an employer…”

“Oh, that’s right. Your professor gave you an introduction to the university.”

“Mm-hmm, he found me a job as the school affairs assistant for a lab. I wanted to keep working even after I married, and I liked Japanese literature. Academia itself, really.”

“Hmm.”

“Society was still pretty straitlaced back then, and getting married and giving birth while you were in school was pretty unusual. This was just after the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was amended, but in practice, I think somebody in my position would have had a hard time finding a job with an ordinary company.”

I pick up my mug and drain what’s left of my beer.

“So I’m grateful to that professor, and for the university’s response. ‘Academic freedom is guaranteed.’ Educational institutions should be the guardians of diversity, et cetera.”

After that little speech, I order a draft beer from a passing server. “What about you, Shimizu?”

“Okay, get me a refill.”

“All right, one beer and one oolong tea, please.”

Shimizu doesn’t drink. “It’s not that I can’t,” he told me once, when I pressed him as to how on earth he managed to reset his mood without alcohol. “I’m not sure how to put it; I just don’t feel the need.”

At the table across from us, a couple is picking at their meat. The girl is wearing contemporary makeup and reminds me of Momoka Nakajima and Kobayashi. The guy’s in his midtwenties and wearing a suit; he looks as if

he's on his way home from the office. From what I can see, I'd say they've been going out for about six months. After this, they'll probably stop by a convenience store, pick up snacks and tomorrow's breakfast, then go to one of their apartments, his or hers, and sleep in the same bed. They'll continue their relationship, fighting about silly little things and getting jealous, and in about a year or so, they'll hit a turning point. They'll either split up or get married, or maybe their nebulous relationship will continue. All of a sudden, I wonder how *we* look to other people: a forty-eight-year-old woman and her boyfriend twelve years her junior, in a fairly cheap *yakiniku* restaurant.

"Come to think of it, isn't your younger son almost in college, Reimi?"

The tripe on the grill sizzles and shrinks, broiling over the flames. While he asks his question, Shimizu uses his chopsticks to peer at the underside of the meat, as if keeping a careful eye on its progress.

"Yes, he's in his second year of high school," I answer.

Shimizu isn't the jealous type, so I can talk to him freely about my ex-husband and my children. I've told him my story: When I was still in school, I had an unplanned pregnancy with a trading company employee five years older than me, and I decided to go through with it; I married the man, whose name was Takashi, and we chose our children's names—Shouta, Takao—using the *shiritori* game, linking their first and last syllables in a chain. My husband's overseas assignment was extended and we gradually drifted apart; we got divorced when my second son started middle school.

Shimizu always listens to me with a tranquil expression. It's as if I'm telling him about a natural phenomenon—how the sun evaporates seawater and turns it into clouds, and the westerlies carry it until it becomes rain and falls on Japan—and he'll say "Hmm" and listen with interest. "I don't really understand why people get jealous of each other," he told me once.

Still, I think, as I stare at the grilling meat. He doesn't drink, doesn't get jealous, doesn't get mad—does he actually like me at all? Does he actually care for me that deeply, or is he simply indifferent? When I drink with him, that question always comes to mind, and today is no exception. But I stuff it back down and keep talking about my son.

"But here's the thing—instead of going on to college, he says he wants to study shoemaking."

"Shoes? Meaning he wants to be a shoemaker?"

"I guess."

Shimizu seems to be lost in thought.

"…That is a little unusual. You'd make even less of a living with that job than as a designer. I'm sure he wants to work on the creative side, not in a factory or anything, right? He wants a studio, et cetera, et cetera."

"Yeah, most likely."

"Sorry if this is rude, but he's not just trying to escape the university entrance exams, is he?"

"No, I don't think so. He's made several pairs already in the past couple years."

“Huh? At home, by himself?”

“Uh-huh. It looks like he’s using money from his part-time job to get all the tools he needs.”

When I tell him that, Shimizu gets excited and starts peppering me with unusually enthusiastic questions: “What sort of shoes is he making?” “What do you think, as his mother?” I wonder if my graphic designer boyfriend feels a sort of affinity with him.

“He’s the real deal,” he says. “Takao, wasn’t it? He’s got the passion, at least. There are lots of young kids who want to become something. They tend to ask lots of questions online, go out and teach themselves all the critics’ jargon, and then rip apart the works of others. And it’s not that I don’t get how they feel, but…”

Carefully watching the meat on the grill, Shimizu speaks quietly, as if he’s reminding himself of this, too.

“But when people really, really want to make something with their whole heart, before they ask any questions or say anything to anybody, *they’re already making it*.”

By the time I get home, it’s midnight. When I open the door, I hear my older son call, “Welcome back” from the kitchen. “You’re late. Were you out drinking?”

Shouta is sitting at the table by himself, drinking my shochu. He’s removed his tie and is wearing a pale-cyan dress shirt; the pickles he apparently bought at the convenience store are sitting on the table, along with one of the smartphones his company deals in. In the light of the old public apartment’s dim lamp, he looks almost like a stranger I just happened to spot on a commuter train.

“Mm-hmm, I had dinner with Shimizu. But we don’t usually see you around these parts, Shouta. What’s up?”

“I came by to pick up my summer clothes and stuff.”

“Hmm,” I say. I go into my room, change out of my suit and into a pink hoodie, and come back to the kitchen. I don’t really want to drink more alcohol, but my hands feel empty without it, and I take a can of beer out of the fridge. I open the pull tab as I sit down across from Shouta. It’s blindingly obvious that we’re both in bad moods. For a long, awkward silence, all we do is sip our drinks. *Hey, he’s the kid here, not me*, I remember, and I try to draw him out with “So? How’ve you been?”

“Eh, nothing to report, really. What about you, Mom?”

“I’m fine—just trucking along. What about Takao? Did you have dinner together?”

“No, I didn’t stop by until after dinner. He washed the dishes, folded the laundry, and went to bed.”

“Mm.”

The conversation promptly peters out. Shouta doesn’t like hearing about my boyfriend, and I don’t want to hear about the girl he’s living with. We both know that very well.

"…This kitchen sure is dark. How old is this place?" Shouta asks.

"About forty years, I think," I tell him.

"Coming here is always kinda depressing. It's dark, it's poorly constructed, and it just feels cheap. Like those old dishes, or the sticker residue on the pillars. You should really scrub this place down."

"It's fine like this. Don't touch it."

"I'm not touching it."

What did you come here for? I swallow my reply along with my beer. Sitting here across from my grumpy son, I'm slipping into the memory of that long, dark night when Takeshi Fujisawa and I talked about divorcing. Shouta is older now than Takeshi was when I married him.

"He's already in his second year of high school, huh." Shouta's tone softens just a little. He's talking about Takao.

"Sure is."

"It's about time for him to start thinking about after graduation, isn't it? Have you talked with Takao about it?"

I finally catch on. Shouta was waiting for me because he wanted to talk about this. I pick up the beer can in front of me, realize it is already empty, stand up, and get a shochu glass.

"He says he isn't going to university. Sounds like he's trying to decide between a trade school or foreign exchange."

"Wait, seriously?" Shouta's voice gets louder. "Foreign exchange? The hell?"

I return to my chair with the glass. I wait for Shouta to pour my shochu for me, but he doesn't move. I end up pouring it myself and adding hot water.

"I mean, he can go into shoemaking if that's what he wants, but he should still go to university first, right? What do you think about all this, Mom?"

"Well, I don't know. I'm planning to take my time and talk it over with him, but it's his life, you know?"

Here comes another fight, I think, sighing internally. Shouta and I always end up quarreling over Takao. It's like we're a married couple with different opinions about our son's education.

"I can't believe I have to say this, Mom," Shouta says with judgment in his voice, "but Takao's still just sixteen, and you're the only parent he's got. Please, for the love of God, act like one. He's not your housekeeper."

"I'm not treating him like a housekeeper."

Shouta ignores my objection.

"Like, sit down with him and talk about the huge difference between the average salaries of high school graduates and college graduates. Let him know how hard it is to find a job when there's a break in your résumé."

"I'm going to. Soon."

"If you've got time to take a struggling designer out to *yakiniku*, you could take Takao along and have these conversations."

That hits a nerve, and I throw my empty beer can at Shouta. It bounces off his shoulder with a dull little *tonk*.

"Whoa, hey! What the hell?!"

"What's your problem?! You're the one shacking up with a struggling actress without a plan!"

"Don't change the subject!"

Shouta sounds angry. There, see? You don't give me an inch. Even though you came out of my body. Even though I nursed you at my breast.

"I'm not! We're talking about how to live a life. By the time I was your age, I was working and raising an elementary schooler!"

A wave of self-pity hits me, bringing tears with it.

"Yeah, that was me. Remember?"

"It sure was! You were so little and genuine, and then out of nowhere you turned into some strange man. I don't even know if you're on my side or not!"

My own words break the dam, and the tears spill over. My head goes fuzzy, and a sweet sense of comfort spreads through my chest. I take another gulp of shochu.

"Argh, come on, not again," Shouta mutters. "Look," he says aloud, "I'm sorry, all right? You're an adult; you can't break down this easy. And don't drink so much. Go take a bath and go to sleep."

"Don't wanna. I'm gonna drink more," I say, pouring shochu into my glass.

"Gimme a break," Shouta's voice says, sounding farther away than it did.

When did it happen? I think again.

When did everybody go so far away?

When did they leave me behind?

* * *

Children grow up so fast that I can't hope to keep up.

That's what I think after the parent-teacher-student conference at school. I'm conscious of how tall my son is as he walks beside me.

"Takao, how old will you be next month?"

"Eighteen."

That means I'll be turning fifty-one. As I look up at the low, ash-gray sky above the vivid yellow gingko trees along the street, the sigh leaves my mouth in a white cloud. It happened in a twinkling. No wonder Momoka Nakajima's changed, too.

After narrowly managing to stay on the register a year and a half ago, Momoka Nakajima is currently in her third year at university. Even now, when we pass each other at school, she bows to me politely. Lately, I hear she's been enthusiastically frequenting the library so she can get into an especially competitive seminar. My coworker Kobayashi spends her days lecturing new employees like a veteran now. Shouta is still dawdling in an informal live-in relationship that won't go anywhere (I think).

During the past year and a half, I've bought a new car, since my old one was almost due for an expensive inspection; had two gastroscopy procedures; bought two new suits and three new pairs of shoes at shops I frequent; and made several visits to watering holes that may or may not have been appropriate and managed to seal several incidents that I've decided never to think of again into the depths of my memory. I broke up with Shimizu. By doing all of this, I took the surges of emotion that welled up from day to day, and I swaddled them in liquor and paperbacks and old skirts, and gently buried them in the damp soil of this city.

And now winter's on its way again.

With Christmas coming next month, the town is decked out with colorful decorations and fizzing with excitement. My son is walking next to me, but he doesn't see any of it. He's skipped right over New Year's and his high school graduation, and he's looking at what lies beyond them. *Italy, hmm?* I think. I've never been there. Come to think of it, I've never been overseas at all.

That's unexpected.

I would have thought that I was the type who'd go far away, not Takao. I read all those books when I was a child, and I yearned so much for foreign lands. When I grew up, I thought I was going to live in some distant country. After I had Shouta at twenty-one, though, while I fought to handle the pressures of daily life, time flew past in the blink of an eye. I've been living in Tokyo since I was born. Nearly all of my life has been spent within an area so small, it'd only take you an hour to drive around the outer edges.

My son is leaping out of that circle with unnerving ease.

When I get called into the student guidance office, Mr. Itou, my son's homeroom teacher, seems a little bewildered.

"Erm, you're his mother?"

"Yes."

"Please, have a seat."

Oh! Did I look like his older sister? I think happily. *Yay!* I considered wearing a conservative, PTA-type suit, but instead I decided to go for it and wear a pleated above-the-knee skirt, and it was the right choice. It's charcoal gray, with lace at the back, an umber-colored sash belt at the waist, and a white blouse with a fairly large bow at the collar. I haven't been to a high school in a while. I'm happy to go, but worried that I'm a little *too* happy. When I sit down in one of those good old school chairs, Takao looks at me in shock.

"…Is that cosplay?" he whispers.

"No, it is not!" I hiss back.

"So, Ms. Akizuki." Clearing his throat awkwardly, Mr. Itou begins. "As I expect you're aware, Takao says he doesn't intend to take the university entrance exam. He'd like to study abroad at a university in Florence and learn shoemaking there. He intends to fit in as much part-time work as possible before spring, during the remainder of high school, to save up for

his school expenses. Did your family discuss all this before he came to this conclusion?"

Wow, this really is a parent-teacher-student conference! Ooh, it's so exciting. I make my voice serious, and I tell him: "Yes. My son initially brought that up quite a while back, during his first year of high school. I was pretty surprised, but we've talked it over a lot since then, and now I'm convinced."

Mr. Itou's expression hardens. "With all due respect," he begins, not even trying to disguise that this is a lecture. "With all due respect, neither shoemaking nor studying abroad in Italy sounds like a very practical choice to me. There's no precedent for either at our school, and if he wants to go on exchange, he should be able to find plenty of opportunities for it while he's at university."

Oh, yes, I remember these kinds of teachers, I think, feeling oddly nostalgic as I listen to the man's deep, gym-teacherly voice. At this point, his overzealous dedication is charming, but back then, he would have scared me to death. When I steal a glance at Takao, he's looking down with a neutral expression. *My, he really is special.* If I were a student, I would have broken down just facing this tough, tracksuited teacher.

"Ms. Akizuki. I've investigated this myself. Planning and design at a manufacturer may be one thing, but in Japan, the need for shoemakers in the industry is in decline. Manufacturing bases have been moved completely to developing countries in Asia, and Japan doesn't have a culture of bespoke shoes for individual customers. If Takao still wants to pursue this even with that knowledge, then of course his resolution is admirable. However, those strong feelings are another reason why he should be able to search for a way while attending university in Japan as well. Studying abroad immediately after graduation, particularly in a country where English isn't the main language, is a big risk. Anyone can get into a language school, but he may not be able to qualify for a university over there, and even if he does, he might not be able to graduate. Even assuming he graduates, once he returns home, he'll have a much harder time finding a job than other new graduates. That's a basic statistic."

His voice is so low, it seems to reverberate in my toes, and Mr. Itou's eyes go to Takao. Takao looks up.

"Akizuki. I think you should go to a Japanese university. Just so you can leave as many possibilities open for yourself as possible. What do you think?"

Takao opens his mouth, then closes it. He looks like he's slowly searching for words that he's shut away somewhere deep inside himself. Through the closed window, the afterschool murmur seeps in like the smell of diluted sweat. Suddenly, I feel like I'm wearing a school uniform again. The texture and smell of the winter uniform's thick navy-blue fabric rises in my mind so clearly, it's as if I'd put my arms through its sleeves that

morning. It's been over thirty years since then, and yet this world hasn't faded the tiniest bit. It's startling.

"I'm very happy that my teachers and family are kind enough to be concerned about me," Takao begins slowly. "As you say, shoemaking is probably a very hard field to break into. That's why I know I'll never accomplish it if I don't try with everything I have. I don't want to make excuses about wanting to have it all, or avoiding risk, or leaving possibilities open."

Mr. Itou looks as if he wants to interrupt, but Takao keeps going.

"I want to go to Florence because I want to work with shoes professionally, not as a hobby. Shoes, particularly women's shoes, are fashion. There are clear trends, and if you don't follow those trends, your business won't succeed. Europe is the heart of both fashion and technology. Even when it comes to raw materials, European trade fairs are what determine the year's trends. All the techniques and materials involved in shoemaking are concentrated in Florence. That means this isn't about whether I want to go overseas or not. Studying abroad is just *necessary*, plain and simple."

As we're walking down the slope toward the station, it starts to drizzle, and I take Takao into a pub that happens to catch my eye. "Hey, wait, I'm in my school uniform," he protests, but I drag him in. "You're going to Europe, remember? This is practice. It's fine as long as you don't drink." We sit down at the end of a table in the back. I order a Moretti, to set the mood, and get Takao a cola.

"Your teacher was pretty cute," I tell him.

"Wha—Cute? Who was? You mean Mr. Itou?"

"He never let up. He's genuinely worried about you."

"…He was my homeroom teacher during my first year, but today was the first time I've talked to him that much. I don't know him all that well."

For a little while after that, we gaze out the window in silence. It's gloomy inside the pub, and the big window facing the street looks almost like an enormous aquarium. Beyond the glass, colorful umbrellas swim back and forth in their unsteady paths.

I don't think Takao's determination would have changed whether we had a parent-student-teacher interview or not, I think. Even when he was little, he was the type of kid who played with my shoes. I have quite a few pairs, for fun, and somewhere along the way, cleaning and maintaining them became Takao's job. By the time he was in middle school, he'd started to take apart the ones I didn't wear anymore. His interest had shifted from shape to structure. He'd use a hair dryer and electric hot plate to remove the glue from women's shoes, take out the shanks, and split the heels and then put them all back together. By the end of his second year of high school, Takao had started to search on his own for the course he'd take after graduation. He'd gone to several information sessions for shoemaking schools in Japan; he'd met and talked with actual shoemakers. He made me

introduce him to a shoe workshop I was familiar with. The more professionals he spoke with, the firmer his resolve to study abroad grew. He identified several Italian language schools that were affiliated with Florentine universities, requested materials in Italian, pored over them, and narrowed the schools down to one. He withdrew from the savings he'd earned and wired the money for the entrance fees, and now he already had permission to start school there next year. He said he was planning to go to the language school for half a year and then take the entrance exam for an art college. He'd buckled down and checked every item off the list all by himself, all while going to high school, working part-time job shifts, and studying Italian through radio lessons.

"By the way…"

After picking up my second Moretti at the counter, I go back to the table and sit down, asking the question that's just popped into my head.

"What happened to the girl with the spring shoes?"

"Huh?"

There's a little pause, and then Takao turns red. I start grinning.

"You know. Her. The older girl you had a crush on?"

"N-nothing's happened, not really."

"Still unrequited?"

He's clammed up, looking cross, and he won't answer. Hmm.

"So you still like her, huh? How about that."

"…" He raises his cola bottle to his lips, but it's empty.

"Did you tell her about studying abroad?"

"…Not yet."

"Hmm. Well, can't always have everything."

As I tell him that, I'm remembering what he said in the student guidance office. His older lady friend and his dream of being a shoemaker: Neither is a simple thing, and he may not be able to have them both. Maybe he wants to learn to make shoes she'll really be able to walk in this time.

The rain lets up, and when we leave the pub, the whole city is enveloped in a faint lemon-colored light. When I look at the western sky, rays of evening sun are slanting through gaps in the gray clouds.

Oh, that's right.

I remember suddenly.

That's right. I was like that, too. I was the same. It was right around this season, on a day like this one. I made up my mind, and I traveled here by myself.

It was the end of autumn, the year I turned twenty. I went to the gynecology clinic alone, and they told me I was pregnant with Shouta. I walked back to the station with no idea what else to do. Cold rain was falling that day, and I had my umbrella up. The wet gingko leaves carpeting the asphalt muted the sensation that I was walking on the ground at all. After a while, I suddenly realized that the rain had stopped. I paused on the sloping road, looking toward the brightest part of the sky. The roofs of the

distant mixed-use buildings gleamed in the light of the sunset. Several crows were skimming around the gleaming antennas.

I'm going to have this baby, I thought as I gazed at the faraway light. *Even if nobody approves, even if I'm all alone, I'm going to have it.* No excitement, no resolution, no preparation—the decision was as capricious as taking a different route for a change.

Before I knew it, all thought of avoiding risk, or leaving possibilities open for my life, had vanished. Ever since then, I've been traveling. I haven't boarded any airplanes or ships, but my journey continues in the seat of a city bus, in the waiting room of a hospital, in the cafeteria at the university, in the driver's seat of a Japan-made minivan, under a deserted overpass. I've come a very long way on that journey.

"Mom?"

As I'm staring absently at the sky, Takao calls to me.

I look at my son, and I start walking. The light I saw on that day is still there, even now.

Beep-beep-beep , the rice cooker announces.

"Oh, the rice is done," Shouta says dully.

I answer with a noncommittal "Hmm" instead of snapping back at him. *I know, you don't have to tell me.*

The young woman named Rika smiles awkwardly. On the TV, they're showing a flower-viewing party in a park somewhere. I can hear snippets of the easygoing banter in my silent kitchen.

"Rika, do you want some tea?" Shouta says, trying to smooth things over.

"Oh, no, I'm all right. Thanks, Shou," she answers. *Hmm. "Shou," huh?* "Would you care for some tea, Mother?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

I smile at the girl brightly. She's wearing a frilly, feminine blouse. The color's different, but her clothes are very similar to mine today.

"Oh, and also," I add to her olive-green blouse, "I'm not your mother yet, you know."

Her smile freezes for a moment.

Shouta glares at me, but she promptly, cheerfully responds, "Oh, of course that's right, *Ms. Akizuki.*"

Shouta pushes his glasses up and massages the inside corners of his eyes with his fingers, as if he's about to lose it.

Ding. On the table, my phone gives a pleasant chirp, and the three of us look at it expectantly.

"Is that from Takao? What does he say?"

I look at the text. "He's on his way home now, but it's going to be about an hour before he gets here."

We all heave deep, soundless sighs.

We're holding a party for Takao today, but the guest of honor is running late. He went to the Italian embassy to pick up his student visa, but

apparently, a weekend at the end of March is a much more popular time than he expected.

Yesterday was Takao's high school graduation ceremony. Next month, he leaves for Italy. We started talking about getting the family together for dinner, and then it turned out that Rika, Shouta's girlfriend, was also on good terms with Takao, so she got invited as well.

This is the first time Rika and I have met. All Shouta and I do is fight, and I didn't want to meet my son's lover, but we'd probably be fine if Takao were here. We all gathered here on that assumption—but our key figure and buffer isn't here yet.

"He says he wants us to get started without him, but he doesn't want us to drink too much."

As I read the rest of the text, it hits me. *Of course. I can just get drunk now.*

"All right, if Takao says so." Shouta seems to have had the same idea; he looks at me with relief.

"Sure. Let's start off with just a little," I say. Eagerly, we take cans of beer out of the fridge and line them up on the table.

"Yes, we'll go slow." Rika starts putting plastic containers she brought into the microwave.

"Cheers!" We click our cans together.

"Takao, wait, no! Don't come in!" Shouta cries when my second son finally gets home and opens the kitchen door.

"Oh, come on! Don't act like I just walked in on a murder scene."

"She's right, Shou, that's rude. Eeeeee, Takao, it's been forever!"

"Hi, Rika."

After greeting *my girl* Rika with a smile, Takao looks from me to Shouta and back with exasperation.

"Come on, you guys, I told you not to drink too much."

As I take another swig of the sweet potato shochu Rika brought as a present, I protest that we're *not* drinking too much, although my words are running together.

"So anyway, Rika, back to the subject of Shouta's first romance. He wrote his first love letter when he was in fifth grade."

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm."

Rika's eyes are sparkling, Shouta's sulking and drinking shochu nonstop, and Takao gets a cola out of the fridge and joins us at the table.

"This boy, I swear. He gave the letter to me first to *proofread*."

"Hey, Mom, knock it off, would you?!"

"I still remember what it said. In the very first line, he wrote, 'Please marry me.' I had no idea what to say about that."

"Yaaaaaaugh!" Shouta screams as Rika squeals.

"Guess I really did just witness a murder," Takao mutters with sympathy.

“But it makes you wonder, Mother,” Rika says, slurring with utmost seriousness. “If Shou proposed as a grade schooler, why hasn’t he said anything like that this time around?”

“I’m gonna go buy some liquor,” Shouta murmurs, and he slinks out of the apartment. *He made a break for it, he got away.* Rika and I laugh together. Exposing all of Shouta’s past embarrassments has made me feel much better.

“Did Shou and Takao put these stickers here?”

Rika goes to stand in the kitchen with Takao and looks at the line of sticker remnants on the pillar. It’s true that the faded stickers are hard to miss, stuck on in layers like that. Most of the pictures have peeled off, but some of them still have hearts or fruit on them. Rika’s wearing an apron, and as I gaze at her back, I wonder if having a daughter would have been like this.

“Sure did. Takao, do you remember?”

“A little.” Takao’s chopping something, and he doesn’t turn around. “I took over from Shouta.”

“‘Took over’?”

“When Mom made dinner after she came home from work, one of us would put up a reward sticker for doing a good job.”

“Wow, you two were adorable!”

“I’m positive Shouta’s forgotten about it, though.” I laugh. “He can’t remember anything.” As Rika set little bowls with pickled shellfish and seasonal vegetables down on the table, I tell her, “But I remember it like it was yesterday. I can still hear their little voices.”

Kaclunk. We hear the steel door open, and Shouta comes back, carrying shopping bags in both hands. As he puts groceries and beer away in the fridge, he talks cheerfully with Rika. *Geez! He bounced back quick.*

“Oh, right, we’ve got another guest on the way,” Shouta tells me, grinning.

“Huh? He’s really coming?” Takao says with surprise.

“Yeah,” Shouta replies. “I gave him a call, and he said he’d love to come if it wasn’t going to cause us trouble. He sounded super nervous.”

“A guest? Who?”

Rika and I both ask the question at the same time. *“Who?”*

“Who do you think?” Shouta asks, drawing out the suspense.

Takao is smirking.

I can’t even guess.

“Ta-daaaah! It’s Shimizu!”

Shouta sounds incredibly proud of himself for pulling one over on me. *Hmm? Shimizu? Who’s that? …What?!*

“Huh?! Shimizu?! What? Why? Wait, how did you two know his number?”

“He gave it to us back when you ran away from home.”

“But we broke up!”

“I know you did. You wouldn’t stop talking about it—which means you couldn’t get him out of your head.”

Takao is explaining to Rika, “He’s a graphic designer my mom dated; he’s twelve years younger than she is.”

“What?! Twelve years?!” Rika yelps.

“Hey! You over there! I never said you could talk about this!”

“Now, now. I bet that sobered you up, didn’t it?” Shouta is really getting a kick out of this.

It sure did. Shouta’s revenge was a success. *Argh… I need to go fix my makeup.*

“Oh? Mother, where are you going?” Rika calls as I’m about to leave the kitchen.

“My makeup,” I say, flustered.

Shouta laughs. “He won’t be here that soon. Calm down and have a seat. We’re celebrating Takao, right? Let’s drink to him first.”

“I think it’s a little late for that,” Takao says, looking disgusted. “You just want another excuse to drink, right?”

“Let’s start over,” Rika chirps, setting out a variety of different types of alcohol on the table. “What’ll it be, Takao?”

“Ginger ale, please.”

The four of us take our places at the table. I pick up a glass of shochu, Shouta takes a can of beer, Rika raises a glass of white wine. “Congratulations!”

We drink a toast with our mismatched beverages, and I remember the view of those antennas in the light. That light never fades. That single moment illuminates my path forever.

“—Thanks. To a new journey,” my younger son says, filled with determination.

Iwa bashiru / tarumi no ue no / sawarabi no / moeizuru haru ni / nari ni keru kamo

(*Man'yoshu* volume 8:1418)

Translation: New bracken shoots / sprout by the edge / of the waterfall / tumbling over the rocks: / spring has come

Context: A joyful poem by Prince Shiki, written when he sensed the coming of spring in the young bracken ferns.

EPILOGUE

When We Can Walk Farther.
—Takao Akizuki and Yukari Yukino

It occurs to her that it's been four and a half years since her last visit to Tokyo.

As she gazes out at the early-morning ocean from the window of the Yosan Line train, Yukari Yukino realizes she hasn't gone even once since she went home.

Ponderous cumulus clouds hang low over the ocean, almost as if enormous fish are covering the sky, and the scale of it thrills her. Yukino's eyes trace the subtle gray gradations on their landward-facing bellies, following them out to sea. She can't tell the color of the offshore clouds from that of the little islands that float on the sea. Under that hidden morning sky, the ocean seems like a vast sandbox. It's so perfectly still, it really doesn't look like water. She imagines herself running across that sandbox with another little thrill: *Look at how big it is!* The ocean is never the same two days in a row.

I wonder if the landscape can shape human hearts, Yukino thinks, out of nowhere. The thought reminds her of that other view, four and a half years ago, on the September day when she left Tokyo and returned to her hometown. Of what she saw from the train she took from Matsuyama Airport to her own area, Imabari.

As the sun fell lower and lower, more and more lights had come on in the houses. She caught glimpses of figures in the kitchens, preparing dinner. The lights were yellow and warm, but she was surprised at how far they were from one another. The physical distances between houses, between people, were much greater than they were in Tokyo. *This is loneliness in its purest form*, Yukino thought. It was clearest when the sun went down, making you feel small and uncertain. *That's why people seek out others*, Yukino thought, feeling as if she'd realized something important.

After she'd been home for about a month, Yukino had found a position as a provisional teacher at a private high school in the city. She worked there for two and a half years. At the same time, she took the prefecture's teacher employment exam. Now she was working as a classics teacher at a public high school on a small island. She lived at home with her parents, who were getting older little by little, and she drove a little domestic car to work every morning over a high, enormous suspension bridge.

At first, the black kites languidly wheeling over the ocean from the coast road had given her a curious feeling, but now the days she'd spent working in Tokyo seemed stranger and more distant.

A heavy, metallic clanking envelops the train car, and Yukino lifts her head. The express is crossing the Great Seto Bridge. The steel pillars stream past, and shining clouds drift far beyond them, hiding the morning

sun behind them. The ocean beneath those clouds shines, too, like a great band of light.

My heart's pounding, Yukino thinks.

I'm nervous. I decided to go by train because I was afraid of getting there too soon…but maybe that wasn't the right decision. Are these nerves going to last another four hours? Will I be able to hold myself together until I arrive?

Until I reach that garden of light…

* * *

According to his research, the cheapest flight to Tokyo went through Finland.

A flight to Osaka had been canceled due to a structural issue or something like that, so Takao Akizuki is seeing quite a lot of Japanese people in the lobby of the Helsinki-Vantaa International Airport. His ears catch the sound of Japanese frequently, which just makes him more tense. No matter where he goes in the Oltrarno district of Florence, where he's lived for two years, he's almost never seen anyone Japanese. For the first two months or so, the loneliness was crushing, but it wasn't long before he started to find it pleasant. It was a firm reminder that he wasn't anybody yet, that he didn't belong to anything, that *he was just en route*. His own inexperience had irritated him so much in Tokyo, but in Florence, it hadn't bothered him a bit. Being confronted with the techniques of so many artisans had shown him keenly, deeply, that his lack of experience was only natural. Now, Takao knows he's on the path that will lead him to them.

There are still three hours left until his flight to Narita. He goes into a small café and bar in the airport and orders a half pint of Strongbow, hoping a drink will help him relax. Instead of a half pint, the waiter brings him a one-pint glass that's about 70 percent full. Bad service. Still, more is better. He'll drink until it really hits him and sleep on the plane. He's still more than half a day from Tokyo; if he stays this tense the whole time, he won't last.

For the two years until he graduated from high school, he exchanged occasional letters with *her*. Asking for her e-mail address seemed overly familiar, so he never did.

The first letter had come from her. She'd written that she was teaching at a private high school. Beside the last line, *I'll write again*, she'd drawn a small shoe. Takao was especially glad to hear she'd become a teacher again, and her support of his shoemaking made him truly happy. When he told her he'd be studying abroad in Italy, he took the plunge and wrote his own e-mail address in the same letter. The next letter he received was an e-mail, after he arrived in Florence. Takao kept exchanging e-mails with *her*, once every two months or so. They sent each other brief reports on what they'd been up to. They both carefully avoided writing about anything too personal, such as whether either had a lover or not. That said, Takao was so

busy with his studies and daily life that he didn't have much of a personal life to report.

For his next drink, he orders a pint of Peroni, and what he gets is a glass that's 80 percent full. Takao smiles weakly and starts in on it. He advances the hands on his Diesel watch (a farewell gift from his brother) by seven hours, in hopes of adjusting little by little.

I don't know whether she has a lover now, or if she's married, or anything like that. As he drinks his beer and gazes absently at his watch, Takao thinks. Even if she is single, he suspects she's probably gotten a few proposals. *After all, if I'm twenty—it means she's thirty-two.*

It's okay, though. I don't mind whether she's single or not. You can't turn back time. I have something more important this time—I'm going to fulfill the promise I made her. I don't know whether she thinks of what happened back then as a promise or not. I don't even know if she remembers it. To me, though, it was a promise.

In that garden of light, almost five years ago, I touched Ms. Yukino's foot.

And I did it so I could make her a pair of shoes.

* * *

"I'm making a pair of shoes right now."

I remember what Akizuki told me in that arbor, surrounded by shining rain. "I haven't decided who they're for, but they're women's shoes," he said, and he traced the shape of my foot onto paper.

I don't know whether he remembers it or not, but to me, that was a promise. Someday, when he's a real shoemaker, I'd like to order shoes from him. Whatever Akizuki makes will be like our hearts back then given shape.

"Next stop, Nagoyaaaa. Now arriving at Nagoya."

The conductor's laid-back voice echoes from the speaker. *Oh no, I'm already in East Japan!* She's emptied three cans of beer, but they've only made her more nervous. Through the window of the bullet train, a line of steel towers stretching into the distance streams past smoothly, like a perspective exercise in an art class. The May sky is solid gray.

The girl selling onboard snacks and drinks is approaching. Yukino considers whether she should buy a little more beer.

* * *

When he disembarks from the Narita Express at Shinjuku Station, a light rain is falling.

Tokyo's May humidity brings so many memories with it, and Takao sucks in a deep breath on the platform. Abruptly, he remembers taking a deep breath just like this when he stepped off crowded trains in high school.

He's spent two years working as hard as he can in Florence, and before he knew it, he was able to get by in Italian. Although he's still a student, he's allowed to work as a sort of assistant at one of his favorite shoe workshops.

When he decided to return home for a visit, he summoned his courage to let Yukino know, and she replied that she'd be in Tokyo to run an errand at around that time. And so Takao's goal for the past three months has been to finish *those* shoes before he goes home.

Takao pushes through the ticket gate, then deposits his suitcase in a coin locker. Carrying only his backpack, he visits a kiosk and buys a vinyl umbrella. The clerk who helps him is so polite that it startles him. The design on the Japanese yen that he takes out of his wallet looks very strange to him.

* * *

She disembarks from the Sobu Line train at Sendagaya Station.

Leaving her small wheeled carry-on bag in a coin locker, she opens her madder-red folding umbrella and leaves the station. Her umbrella turns into a surround-sound speaker, bringing the noise of rain to her ears. The sound tells her that the rain has grown heavier.

I ended up drinking a little too much. I need to sober up, she thinks, wandering into the café next to the station as if she still went there every day. "Will this be for here or to go?" asks the cashier.

"Oh, to go, please," she answers. Then she adds, "Um, two of them."

* * *

Once he crosses the bridge in the Japanese garden, the sound of the rain changes slightly.

The sound of raindrops rustling the leaves is louder than the sound of rain on water. The clear twitter of a mountain white-eye twines around the squelch of his wing-tip boots, shoes he's made for himself. He can see the surface of the water beyond the black pines, reflecting the pink of the azaleas, the red bark of the umbrella pines, the dazzling green of maple leaves.

Takao's backpack holds shoes for *her*. Small pumps with two-and-a-half-inch heels. The toes are pastel pink, the bodies a near-white flesh tone, and the heels lemon yellow, as if they've been exposed to the sun. The long straps to wind around her ankles have cutouts shaped like maple leaves sewn to the ends. These are shoes that will let her walk for a long time.

Somewhere, a large-billed crow gives one assertive call, and from the far reaches of the sky, distant thunder rumbles softly.

The thunder whispers.

The words rise to Takao's lips, and he knows something is about to happen.

Behind the curtain of wet maple leaves, the arbor comes into view. Someone is sitting inside. Breathing in the scent of the rain to calm himself, Takao goes nearer. The clouds of leaves fall behind him, revealing the whole structure.

The figure is a woman in a pale-green skirt.

Takao stops in his tracks.

She has a coffee cup raised to her lips, and her soft hair is trimmed evenly above her shoulders. In a gentle motion, she looks at him.

Yukino’s tense, near-tearful expression slowly dissolves into a smile, and Takao watches her.

Like the sun coming out after the rain.

AFTERWORD

I've always had an unrequited love for novels.

And not only novels. Manga and movies and animation, and real-life scenery, too. I love them, but they aren't all that interested in me. I suppose I'm technically too grown up to be thinking about something so beyond my control, but I just can't shake the feeling.

I work as an animation director, so at the very least, I have the opportunity to tell animation, "Look how much I love you." However, it doesn't work that way with novels. The best I can do is page through a paperback now and then in my spare time, on trains or while I'm waiting for rendering (since in digital animation, it takes quite a while to compile the footage on computers), and think, in frustrated awe, *How can novels be this fascinating?*

So you can imagine my delight when *Da Vinci Magazine* gave me the opportunity to serialize *The Garden of Words* as a novel. The writing itself was fun; I could freely do so many things that were difficult or impossible to do in animation… For example, I could write the sentence, "She gives a smile like a lost child." Whenever I did something like that, I'd think (to my animation-director self), *Check that out! Check that out; you'd have a hard time showing that visually, wouldn't you!* Can the actress make her expression sufficiently like that of "a lost child"? Can the animators create a drawing that will bring the words *like a lost child* to the mind of every viewer? It's impossible. No doubt the anxiety would be clear, but it would be incredibly difficult to create a visual that would express that simile: *like a lost child*. Or I'd write, "I could hear the after-school chatter in the halls beyond the door, like the faint noise from somebody else's headphones." I'd grin and think to my visual side, *You could never do this.* Audiences won't associate the sounds of a classroom environment with sound bleed from headphones.

Writing brought it home to me that the pleasure of novels is in the strings of letters themselves. Now that I'm looking back over it, I realize that I was the only one so excited about it, but it was still an enjoyable time for me.

I'm backtracking a bit, but this book is the novelization of a 2013 animated film of the same name, which I directed. Meaning I wrote the novel for a movie I directed myself. However, the original movie was a forty-six-minute, midlength feature film shown only from the perspectives of Takao and Yukino. In contrast, in the novel, I increased the number of narrators, boosting the amount of content until a film version would have run over two hours, and reassembled it. I tried to write it in such a way that

both people who'd seen the original film and people who hadn't would be able to enjoy it.

I was excited to tackle the work of writing, but naturally, the fun didn't last. I soon realized that visuals are an inevitably superior, and more fitting, means of expression.

For example, take things like "atmosphere." Say I'm depicting a cityscape at night. I layer music that has a tinge of sadness over it. A light will go on in a window somewhere, or be abruptly extinguished—the timing doesn't really matter. That's all it takes for a film to envelop an audience in a particular sense—*atmosphere* is the only word I have for it. Long story short, these atmospherics are the emotions given off by human activity, and a film can evoke them with no more than a light in a window. How do you create the equivalent of that in a novel? Questions like that drove me nuts.

For the sake of brevity, I won't write about it in detail, but there are many other types of metaphors that can be portrayed more eloquently with visuals. Sometimes a single cut of an animated ring of ripples can convey emotion that it wouldn't be possible to communicate even with several pages of writing.

In addition, ultimately, technical issues aside, I kept worrying about the extremely natural question of *what* to write. By the time I was finished, all I could think was, *Wow, novels and novelists are something else.* I was also a bit disappointed to find that I was as far from reaching their level as ever.

In the end, what I gained from writing a book was an even deeper unrequited love for novels and animation. But I had never been hoping for a mutual relationship in the first place. There may even have been something similar in Takao's feelings for Yukino. Come to think of it, all the characters in this book have some sort of unrequited love, and I am again reminded that this sort of human emotion was what I wanted to show. The fabric of this world is woven from the feelings of longing for someone, for something, that we have in isolation. That is what I wanted to depict in this book.

A tale of "lonely sorrow," far older than "love."

That was the tagline for the film version of this book. In the *Man'yoshu*, more than thirteen centuries ago, the word for "love" was written with the characters *lonely sorrow*, and even today, I'm sure there are many people for whom the use of those characters rings true.

In the process of writing this book, I spoke with all sorts of people. Beginning with Professor Kaoru Kurasumi, who chose the *Man'yoshu* poems that appear in the book, I talked to shoemakers, high school and university teachers, current high school students, people working in sales for manufacturing companies, and many, many others. Your stories all gave the book added depth, and I'm profoundly grateful.

In addition, I'd like to express particular gratitude to Chiharu Ochiai, whose deep love and insight have supported this work from the film onward.

I was working on this book while the movie *The Garden of Words* was in theaters, and so I ended up writing most of the manuscript at destinations I was visiting for work. It doesn't have much to do with the content, but looking back, I wrote in quite a few places, so I'll list them here for fun: America, Shanghai, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Russia, Scotland, France, and Vietnam. In most of these, I was attending film festivals and animation events, while I visited some of them to look for locations for other projects, but the hotel stays at each destination and the plane trips there and back served as valuable writing time. In addition, when I wrote the epilogue, I was on a train crossing the Seto Inland Sea between Honshu and Shikoku myself. The views I saw from the windows may have lent some color to the text.

Thank you very much for picking up this book, and for reading it.

February 2014, Makoto Shinkai

ESSAY

NORIKO KANDA

Novels are like mean-spirited older lovers—they see straight through to our adoration for them, but won't show us everything about themselves. All too often, you think you've come up with a marvelous, original tale only to find that someone's actually written it already.

There are some stories, great stories, that feel as if they incorporate our thoughts and even the experiences we're living through now. There's no need to despair, though; using part of one of these great stories as a foundation for something new is a very respectable way to create a novel. It's been said that the writer Mieko Kanai thinks of writing a novel as obsessively covering those foundations in graffiti, but I think that the challenge of novel writing may lie in looking for fascinating ways to fill in the gaps of the foundation.

The novel *The Garden of Words* was written by animated film director Makoto Shinkai, and it uses a film he himself produced and directed as its foundation. The basic storyline—Takao, a high school student who aspires to be a shoemaker, meets the enigmatic Yukino in a rainy park—unfolds as it did before, but the author himself has included more details regarding how he went about filling in the gaps of that foundation. Since the story is told from the perspectives of various characters, readers learn about more than Takao's and Yukino's pasts and feelings. We also have the worries and conflicts of the older brother, Shouta, whom we only glimpse in the anime and who is presented there as a confident, relaxed adult; the hidden relationship between the stern-faced, tracksuited Mr. Itou and Yukino; the startling past of Shouko Aizawa, whose animated version looks like nothing more than a bratty, popular girl; and the unexpected occupation and life history of Takao's artificially youthful, rather childlike mother. By filling in their backgrounds, he gives depth to the characters and the story.

However, despite the detail of these depictions, they're exquisitely restrained. If a novel grows too wordy, it turns into exposition and limits the reader's imagination. (Works like this one in particular, where the author has clear images in his mind, tend to go too far in that direction.) Like its taciturn protagonists, though, this story is written without telling too much, instead inspiring the imagination.

For example, what triggered the protagonist Takao's interest in shoes is casually hinted at through his relationship with his mother. Her many shoes are the weapons of a mother who wants to continue her life as a woman; in other words, they're a way to protect herself. That being the case, I'd like you to pick up on the subtle implication of the gentle colors of the pumps

Takao means to give Yukino—they are meant to protect her, and to serve as a symbol of the time they spent together.

The characters' backgrounds aren't all that gets filled in. The settings—the streets of Tokyo and the Japanese garden—are also delicately rendered like characters in the story themselves. The beauty of the scenes in that light-filled garden amid its rustling greenery are beyond description.

In the novel, the characters are written in depth to fill in the gaps in its foundation. However, even if you view the images that form the original foundation (i.e., the movie) after you read the book, I doubt they'll seem shallow to you. *The Garden of Words*, at forty-six minutes, is on the short side for an animated film, and yet it's clear how deftly it has skimmed off the transparent, beautiful, clear layer at the very top of the story.

The novel has one more foundation: the *Man'yoshu*. This is, of course, Japan's oldest collection of poetry, and its role in this book is to run delicate threads of meaning through the entire story.

As you've seen, one *Man'yoshu* poem is given at the close of every chapter to symbolize the current of the story or the emotions of a character. As you read them, you develop a solid sense of the characteristics of that era's poetry. The conditions and emotions of that time are distilled into poems in a frank, unaffected way. While they are generally written in the archaic language of their era, if you read through them, it isn't that difficult to grasp their meaning. Unlike the poems of later years, which gave full play to pivot words, inversion, and allusions to older poems, these chains of words flow powerfully from top to bottom, straight down. Putting them at the ends of the chapters generates a driving force to carry the story forward.

In the scene where Takao and Yukino first meet, Yukino offhandedly recites a poem to him, as if she's quietly saying it to the sky: "The thunder whispers, / and clouds darken the sky. / If rain should fall, / would you stay with me?" This is a type of love poem known as a *soumon-ka*. *Soumon* is an old word that means to ask how the other person is feeling, and these poems were used as romantic gestures between men and women. One lover would send a poem to the other, and the recipient would respond with a poem of their own. There are many examples of these exchanges in the *Man'yoshu*. This serves as a hint about Yukino's occupation. However, the shape of the "response" to this poem shows the trajectory of the boy's feelings for this mysterious adult woman, even though he thinks of himself as nothing more than a fifteen-year-old kid. Do note the gravitational pull of this *soumon* poem, which has been repeated over and over again since antiquity.

The life of the woman known as Nukata no Ookimi, who wrote the poem "As I cross the murasaki field, / shining madder red, / the forbidden land, / will its guard not see you / wave your sleeve at me?" is also reflected in this story in a pronounced way. Nukata no Ookimi was born into an imperial family and became the wife of Prince Ooama (later Emperor Tenmu).

However, she also had the favor of Prince Naka no Ooe (later Emperor Tenji), Prince Ooama's older brother, and it's said that she wrote this poem on an occasion when the two men ran into each other.

Later generations have been fascinated by the personal magnetism of Nukata no Ookimi. While there are in-depth theories that say otherwise, she described a love triangle with two members of the imperial family, not to mention two emperors who would leave their names in history, in such generous, unconstrained terms. Many fictional works have been written about her, beginning with the one that makes an appearance in this novel, Yasushi Inoue's *Lady Nukata no Ookimi*. Ms. Hinako, the teacher who had such a big influence on Yukino's adolescence, says that "everybody has their quirks." That remark may be based in this type of love, which can be found in the *Man'yoshu*. In addition, one phrase in the poem—"shining madder red"—links to the red umbrella Yukino uses on rainy days.

With the *Man'yoshu* as a foundation, we have these rich images that transcend time and space, and the message comes to the fore that people remain the same even after a thousand years. And if they don't change in a thousand years, they certainly can't change in ten. Yukino's experience of idolizing Ms. Hinako and losing her is repeated when she herself is idolized and discarded by Shouko Aizawa, while Reimi Akizuki is startled to discover the same determination she herself had thirty years ago in her son Takao. This may be a bittersweet, foolish thing, and yet it makes you think that the hopelessly heartrending, endearing sight of people living their lives will be just about the same a thousand years in the future, in a society where civilization has advanced even further.

I'd also like to touch on the wonderful writing style that's completely unique to Makoto Shinkai the writer. If I were to describe it briefly, it would be "the sensation of floating." The perspectives he writes sometimes rise lightly, taking a bird's-eye view, and these moments create an ephemeral, beautiful mismatch that lends a captivating sparkle to the text.

For example, take the view down over the city from the top of a tall building. The cluster of buildings seen in a dream that one is gliding through as a bird, or a view that one gazes at with the sensation that one is underwater. This drifting sensation isn't just a spatial phenomenon; it occurs with time as well. A tale is told from the viewpoint of a girl who, for a moment, takes another look at it from her current perspective. This may be a point of view the author cultivated through his work in animation, but when the technique is used with the written word, it leaves a rather vivid impression.

The narration in chapter 9 deserves special mention. This part is told in parallel from Yukino's and Takao's perspectives, and the writer doesn't simply change narrators. Instead, he tries something rather experimental. In the gaps in their conversation, internal statements made in first person and other sentences written in third person mingle together, seamlessly; the two perspectives switch with each other at incredible speed, and he also

changes the spacing between paragraph breaks, showing “indescribable” thoughts striking against each other. The sensation is dazzling and dizzying, as if you’re looking at scattered reflections of light.

It feels as though there’s another, transparent foundation layered over the foundations of the storyline and backgrounds and classical literature. That transparent foundation skillfully links the words and backgrounds, sets the perspective floating, and diffusely reflects the light.

As if several foundations have been layered, then flipped through like the pages of a book, the story begins to move.

(Book reviewer)

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